魔王なオレと不死姫（グール）の指輪 4

柑橘ゆすら
イラスト●しゅがすく

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「どうして皆ハルの部屋に集まっているの？
それに…どうして愛美ちゃんは
頭にパンツを被っているの？！」（杏子）
（プロローグ）

「どうしてそこで
わたくしの胸を見るのですー?」
「おっぱいお化けー!」

「千春…今がチャンスです！
潜水したまま脱出してください！」
「……ブクブクブク（わかった）」
（第四話 温泉）

「――残念だったな、久住千春！
お前の敗北はここに来たときから
既に決まっていたんだよ！」
ランスは笑いながらオレを踏みつけた。
（第六話 霊魂の魔物使い）

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登場人物

久住千春

主人公の魔物使い。世界で唯一の人間と魔物の混血種として大きな力に目覚めつつある。

ゾンミ・ラ・マッケンジー

いつもクールな、グール族の美少女。真面目な性格で、主人の千春に忠実に仕える。

黒瀬杏子

千春の幼なじみで、その正体は巨人族のネフィリム。ゾンミに続いて千春と契約を結ぶ。

アイリス・スカーレッド・リンドブルム
絶滅したとされるレッドドラゴン族の最後の生き残り。外見こそ幼いが強大な力を持つ。
久住愛美（くすみまなみ）
千春の妹でスタイル抜群。魔物を超える行動力で千春に迫る、手遅れな感じのブラコン娘。
蛇使いのルカ
千春の元上司。表向き魔物使いの仕事をしつつ、闇の組織「黒の背信者」を創設していた。
リリス・アルテミシア
巨乳のお姉さんで、正体は魔族のサキュバス。千春たち兄妹の過去に詳しいようだが……。

Prologue

Have we been living at the Netherworld for around two weeks now?
After being safely discharged from the hospital I was referred to by Lilith-san, I returned to my life without further issues.
Once again, I'm surprised by the recent changes in my circumstances.
Specifically… Getting the mysterious job of monster tamer and discovering my true identity as a halfbreed between human and monster.
I miss the time when I considered myself to be a highly ordinary high school student.
My ability to adapt to the changes in my circumstances I've gone through is the reason I managed to splendidly grow as a person.
One last thing.
Recently, I've experienced some changes I have not yet grown accustomed to.

"… ZZZ"

Currently, there's a pretty girl lying besides me in her nightgown cutely snoring on my bed.
Iris Scarlet Lindwurm.
The red dragon girl I made a pact with just the other day who, how should I put it… Seems to be under several serious misunderstandings.
To be specific, Iris seems to think that I proposed to her.
Speaking of that, it's true that I thoughtlessly put on the contract ring I received from Iris, but… In truth, it doubled as an engagement ring handed down in the red dragon bloodline.
The anti-sister measure that I set up before going to bed of blocking the door should be flawless, but… As, somehow, when I open my eyes each morning Iris is sleeping besides me, I'm bothered to a very great extent.

"… Good day. Nice morning, monster tamer."

Iris greeted me while rubbing her sleepy eyes.

“Th-that’s right…”
“Hastn’t thou awoken unusually early this day?”
“… Ahaha. I couldn’t get to sleep last night.”
Mostly your fault, Iris-san.
I kept myself from saying that, which I felt I wanted to say.
… Speaking of the obvious.
It seems that my libido, when I have a girl calmly lying besides me defenselessly sleeping, doesn’t wither out.
—Even if said girl is close to 30 centimeters[1] shorter than me.
In the end, I… As long as it’s erotic, I’m fine with it.
Incredible… A male highschooler’s lust.
As I was amazed by the scope of my own strike zone.

“Chiharu. Are you awake?”

A ringing voice like a wind chime moved by the night breeze.
Zonmi Ra McKenzie.
The one who’s come to my room early in the morning is the girl from the ghoul clan that I’ve made my very first contract with.
“Zonmi? ‘Morning.”
I opened the entryway door and greeted.
“Have a good morning. Erm… Doesn’t it bother you that I’ve come so early in the morning?”
“Of course not. What do you need?”
“I-it’s not that I need something, but… I have to discuss a little something with you.”
“Discuss?”
How weird that Zonmi has something to discuss with me.

“Yes. That… If it’s fine with you, take this, please.”

Saying that, Zonmi handed me a cutely wrapped translucent parcel.
“… This is?”
“This… That’s, they are cookies.”
“Cookies? Cookies… Could it be… They’re handmade?”
“… Yes.”
Zonmi nodded, her cheeks a deep scarlet.
Such a surprising response that it left me befuddled.
Alas, since I have no experience with it, I don’t know, but handmade cookies… Aren’t they given by lovers to their crush?
“Could it be… They are for me?”

When I asked with a doubtful gaze, Zonmi, exaggeratedly shaking her head,
“T-t-t-tha’s wrong! This is… Just by chance!”
“? Is that so?”
“Yep. The truth is, I… Since long ago, my hobby was baking pastries and, since the succubus said she’d lend me the kitchen, I tried making some for the first time in a long while. So then… Since I made too many by chance, I decided to share them with Chiharu…”
“I see. So it’s because of that?”
Her hobby is pastry-making… Zonmi has unexpectedly ladylike hobbies.
“So… You may think of me as an unbecoming woman for this, but… Better than keep standing here talking, if you please, won’t you let me enter your room, Chiharu? Since, to me, pastries go better with black tea.”
“Understood. It’s a bit messy, but don’t mind it.”
“No. It’s no problem.”
Taking off her outdoor shoes at the entrance[2], Zonmi,

“How glad. Somehow, recently… Many things kept popping up and we didn’t have the chance to speak alone together.”

Muttered something.
“Mm, did you say something?”
“No. It’s nothing.”
“Is that so? If I’m not mistaken… Since Iris too likes sweet things, I think this will make her happy.”
“Being told that makes me happy more than… Wait, why has the name of the red dragon come out there?!”
“Eh… That’s…”
So, I realized I’d made an error I couldn’t take back.
How careless.
There’s no need to say that, right now, inside my bed there’s Iris in a nightgown… A third party, not knowing the circumstances will, without fail, get the wrong impression of the situation.
“Hey, Zonmi. As I thought, why don’t we not go with my room?”
“? Why now?”
“… No, as expected, my room is too messy, I can’t go letting people come in in this state—”

“Nu. Somewhat… Boisterous. Monster tamer, who the heck art thou speaking with like such?”

“…”
FIUUUUUU!

Despite not having switched on the cooler, I felt an intensely cold breeze coming from inside the room.
Seeing Iris loitering in my room in a nightgown, Zonmi's face grew pale.
Right after that, her countenance changed into one of anger, and in the end she entered ghoul mode, her eyes like those of a dead fish.
Thinking about it, it's been a long time since I last saw it.

"… Ki-kidnapping and confining a little girl."

"Erm… Zonmi-san? This is not what it seems."
"Hoho! Denying the evidence this late in the game?
Fine. I'm seething with interest of what kind of excuses you yourself will come up with against this. Chiharu… What the heck is this?… Why don't you give me a proper explanation?"
"Understood. The reason for Iris being in my room… That's, of course—"

"'Twould be for child-making."

“Pft!?”
Hearing Iris butt in with quite the outrageous reply, I spat out without time to raise an objection.
“Wha, whawhawhawha. Child-making!?”
“… Humph! Why are thy cheeks red, ghoul woman? It’s just a young couple sleeping together before wedlock. Is it so surprising?”
“…”
For some reason, Iris smiled brimming with self-confidence.
Let’s explain.
Of course, there’s no way the Iris has consummated the deed with me.
Iris, whose knowledge about sex is so lacking that she still believes faithfully in the stork, believes faithfully that if two people that like each other sleep in the same bed, they can make a child.
“Zonmi. I think that you understand, but don’t mind what Iris has said.”
“…”
However, my warning in vain, it seems that none of my words have entered Zonmi’s ears.
“I see. Chiharu… Does this mean that while I was diligently making pastries, you were diligently making children!?”
“Did you try to make a pun!?”
“S-silence! Sex offender! Great lolicon[3] devil!
“…”
What the heck. What a déjà vu[4].
Zonmi held the umbrella she produced from who knows where and had already entered into attack motion.
Just when I had resigned myself and shut my eyes.

“Hey! Why is the zombie at oniichan’s room!?”

Suddenly, a familiar voice echoed inside the room.
Looking to the source of the voice, isn’t there someone slowly crawling out from under the bed?
Scary!
This girl… Scary!
Quite unfortunately, the one who appeared from under my bed was unmistakably my sister—Kusumi Manami.
What more, I don’t know if for the lulz or for what, but my sister, for some reason, was wearing my pants on her head.
“Oniichan. What the heck is this!? Why is the zombie at oniichan’s room!? This is really suspicious!”
“Don’t those words go right back at you?”

“Erm… Chiharu? We haven’t yet finished with our ta…”
“Moreover, what’s with that appearance… Why are you wearing on purpose my pants on top of your head?”
“no. Just crawling from under the bed normally didn’t have enough impact, so…”
“For who are you concerned with!?”
Just my blood-related sister coming from under my bed, I think that has more than enough impact.

“Fua… ‘grief. Being noisy since early in the morning. Haven’t you woken me up because of that?”

“Kyouko!?”
She who was stifling a yawn as if she had been sleeping till just right now, was my childhood friend, Kurose Kyouko.
From the giant tribe—a Nephilim girl.
“… Hey, what’s with this!?”
Kyouko, gasping as though her drowsiness had flown away just by looking around her, opened her eyes.

“Why are you all gathered at Haru's room!?
Moreover... Why is Manami-chan wearing pants over her head!?”

“… Sorry. I myself can’t understand that too.”
That is, anyone who suddenly got in to this situation would hold that doubt.
“In any case, Manami-chan, start by fixing your appearance! Girls can’t go around showing that kind of simply… Improper appearance!”
“Erm… Listen to what I'm saying…”
“That sentence… I don’t want to be told that by Kyouko-oneechan alone.”
Rightfully said by Manami with a cold glare.
This time alone, I’m with my sister’s words.
“… Wha. It’s not like I like showing that!”
It was when Kyouko, in a openly sullen mood, approached Manami.
“Fue…?”
If this cannot be called a miracle, what can be?
Right after Kyouko set foot inside my room.
The belt of Kyouko’s yukata[5] got caught in the doorknob.
If that was all, it would’ve been fine, but… Kyouko, having become emotional, didn’t notice that the belt of her yuakata had been caught in the knob.
FWISH *FWISH* *FWISH*

By the time she noticed that sound, Kyouko was already in her undies.
What the heck is with this girl… How many time has she got to show me her panties to become satisfied?
Well… I don't dislike it, though.
By the way, in addition to that, today Kyouko's panties are quality goods of black laced cloth so thin that her skin can be seen through it.

"Hoho!… How refined."

I reflexively stared fixedly at Kyouko's panties so as to evaluate them.
If I had to say if they suited her or they didn't, these clearly fall into the category of panties that don't suit her.
I believe it's 3 years too early for Kyouko.
However, what I must say is not if they suit her or not, that isn't really a particularly pressing matter here.
Why the heck has Kyouko chosen to wear adult panties that don't go well with her figure?
I'd say… This is but my own guess.
Compared with the girls around me (except Iris), it can't be said that Kyouko's body development gives out a womanly feeling even as flattery.
For that reason… She may have wanted to fill the gap with them by wearing adult-like panties.
The brave sight of my childhood friend making an effort to overcome the complex with her body touched deeply my heartstrings.
As though straight out from a waka[6] made by a great writer from the Heian era[7], interpreting from that period's background—About my mania[8], it's not panties themselves, but "Girls, why do they go with that choice on panties?", it's that interpretation what makes me feel the *moe*[9].

"Wh-what are you staring aaaat!"

"Fuoh!?"
Sure enough, she hit me with her whole strength (rest omitted).
Good grief, with all of this, it's a chaos.
Accomplishing the goals of becoming a monster tamer and making contracts with all three monsters is a good thing, but the bustling situations around me have increased more than ever.
How do I put it, what the heck have I done?

“Monster tamer. This is a bit excessively boisterous… Why dost thou not come with me to fetch something to break the fast?”

Iris suggested while tightly pulling my sleeve.
“Fine. Now that you mention it, I’m starving. I haven’t eaten anything since morning…….. Eh?”
So, at that time I noticed something important.
Since my sister crawled out from under the bed and right after that many things occurred, I had forgotten until just now, but… Now that I think, I had invited Zonmi to my room because she wanted to discuss something with me.
“Erm… Zonmi-san?”
“…”
No reply.
It’s not that she hasn’t heard my words, more like she was ignoring them as she heard them.
“I just… Just wanted to take care of Chiharu…”
Zonmi, after muttering something, pursing tightly her lips and clenching her fist with all her might,

“Chiharu, you moroooooooon!”

After shouting, with teary eyes, she left the room.
And, at the same time, something soft hit my forehead.
Grabbing it and looking at it… It was a portion of cookies inside a vinyl bag.
However, she may have crushed them with her palm after becoming emotional.
The cookies inside the bag closed with a lovely ribbon were thoroughly crumbled.
Looking at them on my hand, I felt an unspeakable feeling of guilt.

Chapter 1: To the land of the ghoul clan

“Hey. My bad. I apologize. Cheer up.”
Next morning.
While we were eating breakfast at the hotel we’re lodging in, everyone on their own, I apologized with a serious tone about the thing yesterday.
“… Really, have you reflected?”
“Of course!”
“Then, tell me why I’m mad, please.”
“Eeerm… That’s…”
I was at a loss of words before the unexpected retort.
All I could think of was, as expected… Because I had broken my promise with Zonmi of hearing what she had to discuss with me?
However, that was an act of God[10].
It’s not like I intended to dishonor my promise with Zonmi.
As I was lost in thought, Zonmi, “haah…”, let out a long sigh,
“It doesn’t matter. I forgive you. Yesterday I acted a bit childish too.”
“Really!?”
“Yeah. However, you must do me a favor instead.”
“… A favor?”
“Yes. Chiharu, before… Didn’t you talk about going to the Land of Ghouls?”
“Yup. Now that you mention it, I did say that.”
In the end, it was rejected on the basis that it was too dangerous to leave the island we’re staying in (that seems to be called the Grandeel archipelago).
“Now that we have decided to stay at the Netherworld for a long time, there’s no reason to stay on this island. It’s the perfect chance. Why don’t you come with me, the two of us, to the Land of Ghouls?”
“…”
In reaction to the words ‘the two of us’, the other girls, stopping the hands they were eating with, gathered their cold glares on me.
“… Why so sudden?”

“To tell the truth, Yesterday I received a letter from my parents and… As I’ve come back all the way to the Netherworld, they must have want you to be introduced to them, Chiharu.”
“I see.”
That is, if I were Zonmi’s parents, I’d be interested in what kind of human my daughter has made a contract with.
“Not that I mind, but… Wasn’t it dangerous to leave the island?”
“If it’s for that, don’t worry, it’s fine. The situation is now different from before… Isn’t it, Lilith?”
As if they had a previous agreement, Zonmi brought the matter up to Lilith-san.
“Yes. Regrettably, since the event of the Black Tamer’s attack the other day, this island has been left without enough remaining power to endure further terrorist actions. Rather, it may be more dangerous right now to stay at the island.”
“… Is that so?”
That means there’s no reason to stay in this island.
“In that case… Why don’t we go? I’m interested in what kind of place Zonmi’s hometown is.”
If that cheers Zonmi up, for me it’s killing two birds with one stone.
When I answered, Zonmi put on a smile like a flower in bloom.

“I-is that so!? Is that so!? I think that father will surely be glad!”

However, contrasting with the joyful Zonmi that was like a kid inside a candy shop, the other girls had sulking faces.
“Muu. Zonmi and oniichan going together to see her parents[11]? I absolutely won’t allow such a thing! It’s obvious she’s looking for her parents approval! If you say you have no choice, bring Manami and the rest along!”
“Ah! If it’s like that, count me in! I think that in order to protect Haru, the more fighting forces, the better…”
Hearing those two’s claims, Zonmi stiffened her face as if she had tried to drink something awful.
“… I-it’s better that you lot don’t come.”
“? Could it be that Zonmi-sama had planned to go just with Chiharu-sama to meet her parents[12]?”
“… Yeah. Of course, that’s what I had planned.”
“For that reason… Having been entrusted with Chiharu-sama’s safety, it’s not like we can approve of you two’s outing. Since certainly, though staying in this island bears a high risk to us, allowing you two to go alone is far more dangerous.”
“… So, what do you mean?”
“On the other hand, carrying a crowd of escorts is out of the question.

Since, leaving us without enough defenses for a crisis, if the populace got wind of it, there's a chance we may fall into danger instead. Here, a little group of elites… That's right, to be specific, Chiharu-sama, Zonmi-sama, Kyouko-sama, Iris-sama, Manami-sama… And myself, what about the six of us to go on the trip?"
"Wa-wait a minute, please! Let alone the other five, we will be bringing the little sister with us? There's no reason to bring her along, being a human!"
"Right… It's mostly as Zonmi-sama says, but…"
Lilith-san's face was clouded by that comment.
"If we force her apart from Chiharu-sama… The result will be scary. Since the one who can stop a rampaging Manami-sama… It's Chiharu-sama alone…"
"…"
My sympathies, Lilith-san.
For starters, in Manami's case, even if you told her not to come, she would absolutely tag along.
I can easily picture my sister hidden inside a suitcase holding her breath.
"So, does that mean we too can accompany them?"
"Yes, of course. Please lend us your strength without fail in order to protect Chiharu-sama."
"… I too was just blasé[13] of beholding this island's scenery. 'Twould not be ill to change dwellings… Perhaps?"
"Ufufu. The sensible titties save the day♪"

"D-don't talk about breasts, please!"

"…"
What do you want, well, I had the slight expectation it would turn like this midway.
Despite going back to Zonmi's hometown being an important event, this time too it's still comes to the usual gang going.
"Uuu… Why… Each and every time nothing goes well?"
Seeing Zonmi murmuring bitterly, casting her glance down to her feet, I once again tilted my head in puzzlement.

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Some days later.
On board the high-speed ferry that Lilith-san had rented, we were aiming to arrive at the Land of the Ghouls, which was about a day's distance from the island we parted from.

Be that as it may… This is an expensive-looking boat.
Being designed with speed in mind, it was not much in terms of size, but even so, apart from individual cabins for us six, it was equipped with various entertainment facilities… The demons' assets seem bottomless.
That ship, sparkling clean from the front down to the deck, it’s just suitable to be the image of a luxury liner.

“A pleasant breeze is this, monster tamer.”

“… Ha, ha! So it seems.”
I’m currently sitting on a bench installed at the ship's open-air terrace.
Till here, all good.
The problem is, the girl before me… Iris is sitting sideways on my lap while naturally hugging me.
I’m not one to say it, but… How has it come to…
From an outsider’s point of view, seemingly getting all cozy with a girl that can be mistaken with an elementary schooler due to her size, I must look like a degenerate.
Let’s repeat it.
Firstly, as to why won’t Iris leave from my side, that’s all due to the sorrowful circumstances she has.
Iris, as the sole survivor of the red dragon clan, has lived until now to take revenge on the Black Tamers, but ever since the contract with me, her ideas seem to have changed a little.
Though I’m glad that she has changed… The next objective she’s set for herself is, so to once again revive her bloodline, to make children.
To make thing worse, as she’s led up till now a solitary life, her sex ed seems to be severely lacking and she believes that if she spends all day next to me, a child will be made.
For that reason… Not fearing men, this should be why she could act unguarded before the opposite sex up till now.
Until now, being considerate with her complex situation, I didn’t point out her misunderstanding, but if I let it keep like this, it would mean letting her once again harbor groundless mistakes.
Personally, it’s not like I’m enthusiastic about it, but… I can’t afford the luxury.
There’s no way around.
Should I… Ask her?
Like this, abiding my shame, I resolved to go to my sister’s cabin.

× × ×

“Eh? You want me to teach proper sex ed to Iris-chan?”
“Yup. Sorry. There’s no one I can ask but you.”
“Fufun. Isn’t it unusual for oniichan to rely on Manami♪ Good! Leave it to Manami♪”
Unfastening one button on her blouse, Manami took a pose that pointlessly highlighted her cleavage.

“If you leave it to me, even the most innocent virgin will pick up a top-notch technique♪”

“How do I say it… Please do show some moderation.”
I know.
Honestly, even I can’t help but feel a bad premonition about leaving it to Manami, but the sad thing is that there’s no one more suited to this task than her.

“… Ye two. What the blazes have ye been conversing about since a while ago?”

Before us siblings who were engaged in a secret talk, Iris knitted her brows.
“Iris. What Manami will teach you from now on, how do I put it… It may give you many shocks, but… Keep your cool.”
“Laughable. The likes of a human, teaching something to a proud red dragon, with a history of ten thousand years, that’s preposterous.”
“… Is that so? Then, it’s all right.”
“Haihai~. *Lesson one*[14]. Manami-sensei’s Health Education (beginner’s course) starts now♥”
“… Nu. He-hey! Don’t pull me with such force!”
“Iris-chan will come with me like a good child. If you keep clinging to oniichan like that, won’t I end up slicing you in three?”
Making the blade inside her jacket’s sleeve sparkle shiny, Manami said something outrageous.
“… Hey, Manami. Aren’t you forbidden from violence?”
“No waaaay. It’s just a cute sisterly joke!”
“… Muu.”
Forcefully convinced by my sister, being parted from me made Iris frankly displeased.
Manami took out some glasses from the desk’s drawer and put them on.
By the way, as Manami usually wears contacts, she shouldn’t need glasses, but… I’d say it’s her way of creating the mood.

Sitting on the bed, Manami, pointlessly crossing her legs,

“First, Iris-chan, do you know the word •••••?”

Without beating around the bush, she blurted a word that sounded as if you had mistaken the channel broadcasting code[15].
T-this chick… She’s good, as expected.
It’s a word that, not even by mistake, a middle school girl could say as if nothing as naturally as breathing.
“…”
Iris was left for a moment with a face that seemed to say “there’s something I don’t understand”, but soon, her cheeks tinged deep red to a level befitting of her title as a red dragon,

“Wha, whawha. Thou… What dost thou blurt so of a sudden!?”

“Listen. You know? You don’t? Answer.”
“Dostn’t take me for a fool! I know that much. It’d be something… Related to men?”
“Oooh. So you know that much. The truth is… Babies, when you insert the ••••• inside the •••••, then…”
“Haha! What dost thou daydream of? There’s no way that thing would go in there…”
“So they say. At first, I couldn’t believe it, you know? Well, why don’t we watch first this movie I have in my cell?”
“…”
Why is it?
It’s not like I’ve made a mistake. I shouldn’t have…
Seeing Iris grow pale and make a face that just said “it’s the end of the world” as she watched my sister’s cell phone movie, I felt a sting in my chest.

“O… Outrageous! Impossible!
What’s this!? This… Infinitely wicked ritual! M-me and the monster tamer… Things like this…”

After that.
Iris, having gained proper sex ed, as originally planned kept a proper sense of distance from me.

Why is it?
Inside my mind, my feelings grew quite complex.

Chapter 2: Sisters

“Chiharu… Wake up… Chiharu…”
My body was slowly swaying. It’s being shaken.
“Mmuah, Zonmi…?”
“You shouldn’t be napping. We’ll soon reach port. The only one who’s not ready is you, Chiharu.”
“Uoh!? Really!?”
Hearing Zonmi’s words, I sprang up from the bed.
And then, I noticed something amiss.

“Hey… Isn’t the room somehow quite cold?”

I didn’t think I’d left a window open somewhere, so that doesn’t seem to be the reason.
Despite the room interior being airtight, for some reason I was freezing as if I had been submerged in cold water.
“… You’ll understand the reason why once you go out.”
“…”
As I was told, I put on my outdoor shoes and went up to the ship’s deck.
I wonder what’s up now.
“Uwah… What’s this…”
A snowy scenery.
All of a sudden, what entered my field of view was a world with a silver layer.

“They say it boasts the greatest surface area in the Netherworld… The continent where ghouls live, Living Lodge.
I heard that it was a country where the snow didn’t melt in all the year, but this is quite…”

For an instant, I really didn’t know who was the one who said that.
Lilith-san, having changed her usual maid uniform for a thick duffel coat, muttered that.

Excuse my rudeness, but in Lilith's case, no matter the situation, her bust size is a dead giveaway.
“The largest continent, covered in snow? This Living Lodge sounds a lot like Russia back at the human world[116].”
“… That’s right. Now that you mention it, I think they have many points in common.
But then, as nine tenths of it are comprised of ice and snow, the monsters living in it are restricted to the ghoul tribe and other members of the undead tribe.”
Before my doubt, Lilith-san coolly answered.
Though it’s been a short time, I learnt something from living with her.
Lilith-san knows a lot about the Netherworld, of course, and also about the human world.
In fact, she who had graduated from a prestigious Netherworld university after skipping grades, also seems to have experienced studying abroad at the human world.
In other words, even among the demons, she’s the elite of elites.
“By the way, Lilith-san. How sly… You cunningly said to only me that I didn’t need thick clothes…”
Trembling in just my T-shirt, I complained in dissatisfaction.
“About that, there’s no problem, Chiharu-sama. Have this…”
“???”
What Lilith-san took out from the inside pocket of her coat was a necklace with a red gemstone.
“This gemstone is a magical stone and this wonderful artifact displays various effects depending on the runes carved on the stone.
By the way, in this magic stone there’s an ‘raising the body temperature when worn’ effect.”
“… Ah. True. It’s not so cold.”
If I wear this magic stone, should I feel relieved even in a land of snow?
“… By the way, is Zonmi alright? She doesn’t seem to be wearing a necklace.”
“Yeah. Don’t worry. To us ghouls, this temperature is rather comfortable.”
“…”
Not only doesn’t she wear a necklace, Zonmi’s choice of clothes is so thin that I feel cold just by watching.
It’s a total mismatch with the surrounding scenery.

“Uwaa—. Look, look! Even though it’s summer, it’s snowing.”
“… This snow thing is truly white. I had knowledge of it though writings, but it’s the first time I witness it in person…”

Each one wearing a magical stone necklace hanging on their chests, Kyouko & Iris looked at the silver-covered world and got pumped up.
“Uu… It’s cold… What’s this. It’s unbelievably cold. Why do I have to suffer this…”
Contrasting with those two, my sister had fallen into unusually low spirits.
It seems that she was also wearing a magic stone necklace on her chest, but as, on top of that, she was wearing thin clothes, it looks like she wasn’t totally protected against cold.
“The heck. You—. If you’re cold you shouldn’t be wearing a skirt! Go back and put some clothes on!”
“Eeeh—. That’s absolutely not possible!”
“… Why?”
“I mean… Since the zombie is wearing a miniskirt with bare legs…If I wear trousers… I’ll feel like I lost. In a femininity sense…”
“… What a weird consideration.”
Am I the only one who thinks he wants my sister to, instead of femininity, learn some common sense?
“Wha, for reals!? The one there is Lilith-san!? Without her maid uniform, I totally didn’t know who she was!”
“I-Is it that so? The truth is, it’s been a while since I last went out without my maid uniform. You can think of them as my everyday clothing…”
“Why have you changed from it?”
“… As expected, I surmised that that appearance was too attention-catching. Erm… Is it that weird?”
“No. Without your maid uniform, Lilith-san, you give a ‘mature woman’ feeling, you’re very beautiful.”
“Be-beautiful…A-am I... Me!?”
“Of course. That aside, who…”

“““…”””

Wha-what’s this shivering?
It’s a bit different from just the cold from the falling snow…
Hasn’t the temperature dropped even more right after I complimented Lilith-san!?
“Fu—n. I see—. As I thought, gap moe[17] attacks are very effective against Chiharu..."
“Moreover, in her case, she achieves it naturally, so it’s excessively wicked.”
“… Kuh! All gentlemen… Like bosoms. J-just a while ago, what little sister-kun imparted to me was an actual fact.!”
“…”

This Iris… In that short time, it looks like Manami has had her totally trained.
It’s difficult to tell if I can be glad or must be sad.
Said little sister, staring intently at Lilith-san breasts with eyes full of scorn,
“But, you know, If you take out the maid uniform from the titty maid, isn’t it just tits?”
Blurted point blank.

“D-don’t talk about my breasts, please!”

“… Ahaha.”
It’s hard to please everybody.
Surrounded by just girls, having lots of gorgeous and happy settings, in times like this, since I have to be considerate to all parties, I can’t help but worry.
That said, bah, like that, us six went through the entry procedures to the land of the ghouls.

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“Welcome back, Zonmi-ojousama[18].”
Some hours later.
Having just finished the entry procedures, the one who came to pick us up was a forty-something old man in a tuxedo.
“Long time no see. Thank you very much for coming expressly to pick us up.”
“…”
Since I had heard that from here on we will continue on in the car of an acquaintance of Zonmi, I was convinced that we’ll ride a wagon or something of the like, but the car parked before us was a classy limousine that wasn’t no worse than one belonging to demons.
“Hey. Haru…?”
“Mm, what’s it?”
“Us all, until now we didn’t know much about the ghoul’s family.”
“Yep. That’s right.”
“There’s no need to say…”
“… Yeah. Seeing this situation… I think that, perhaps, our hunch is spot on.”

““Zonmi (The ghoul) is a rich girl!?””

A shocking (?) fact has just been revealed.
As Kyouko has bashfully said, We didn’t know a thing about Zonmi.
How many members her family has? Where did she live before coming to the human world?
Surprisingly… Not even a thing?
Zonmi is the most polite of us, second to Lilith-san, and her table manners are elegant without fail.
Thinking calmly about it, maybe the development of Zonmi being the daughter of a good family is only natural.

“Oneesama. Long time no see—!”

“Kyah!?”
The moment after those thoughts went around inside my head.
From inside the car a girl promptly rushed out and embraced Zonmi.
“Aruru… Is it you?” Fufu… You’ve grown a lot while I wasn’t watching.”
The one that Zonmi called Aruru was a petite girl one hundred and fifty centimeters tall[19] with the same silver hair as Zonmi.
Her age… Maybe around Manami’s?
Her sharp features, with still some innocence left in them, bore a close resemblance to Zonmi’s.
From the previous conversation, I could surmise that they're sisters.
I didn’t know.
That Zonmi… She had a little sister so cute like this one.
“… How reserved. If you had a little sister, you could have said something in advance.”
“My apologies. It’s not like I planned on hiding it, but…”
“Oneesama. Who are these people?”
“Yes. I haven’t introduced you yet.
This one here is my master, monster tamer Chiharu.
The woman with the glasses over there is the succubus Lilith and this blond girl here is the red dragon Iris… The rest, I’ll omit them since they are extras.”
“I got omitted!?”
Kyouko had her mouth open agape from the shock suffered.

Recently I've grown accustomed to Kyouko's reactions.
"Eeeerrm, Aruru-chan, right? Nice to meet you."
"Just Aruru is fine. Since oneesama's contractor… Is already like family."
"I-Is it like that?"
"… Wow. This is my first time seeing a living human."
"…"
Aruru, full of interest, approached me so as to get a peek.
I felt like retorting with "Does that mean you've seen dead humans!?", but I abstained from it since I thought it was bad manners to retort to a girl I've just met.
"Nevertheless, what a surprise. By no means I thought that Zonmi had a little sister."
"… If this is enough to surprise you, that's troubling. Meruru! I know that you are there. Please quickly show your face."
"…"
A while after Zonmi rose her voice, one more girl appeared from inside the car.
"Eh… Could this be…"
The girl that Zonmi called Meruru had identical features to those of Aruru before me.
"Twins!?"
As I raised my voice in disarray, Zonmi, *ahem*, clearing her throat,

"… Yes. Sorry for the late introduction. These two… Aruru Ra McKenzie and Meruru Ra McKenzie, are my sisters two years apart from me."

She pointed to the two pretty girls before me.
Aruru and Meruru.
Their appearances may be like two peas in a pod, but their atmospheres were contrasting.
Opposite to Aruru, who faces me with a polite smile, Meruru, instead, shows open animosity that feels like "a mongoose before a viper"[20].
Basically, on top of not establishing visual contact with me, she shot me, from time to time, murderous glares.
"… Kuh! Why neechan, with such a dull guy… I will absolutely not allow it!"
"My, my, Meruru. Stop the prejudices before talking enough with him."
"… Humph! Aruru is too fond of humans!"
"…"
I wonder why.
The truth is I feel that I want, like Kyouko, to show a flashy reaction, but since 'something' bugs me to no end, I could only stand upright.
If you ask what's bugging me…

Though the little sisters have such cute names… Zonmi alone has such a deplorable name.
“I-I come here and there are two little sister characters!? It’s the worst! What will be of Manami’s identity!?”
“…”
Though it seems that my little sister was also under a shock for different reasons, I couldn’t care less.

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‘Hey. Though the little sisters have such cute names, why does Zonmi alone have such a deplorable name?’
… If I had a personality that let me ask that straight on, how much happier would my life be?
Totally unable to ask that before the person in question, I secretly asked Lilith-san inside the car.
According to Lilith-san.
The name “Zonmi” may leave a memorable impression at the human world, but it’s relatively common among ghouls.
… Though I don’t understand what were ghouls thinking when they popularized such a misleading name, that’s enough for now.
Next issue.
It has been bugging me since Zonmi introduced her sisters, as her “sisters two years apart from her”.
For some reason, I didn’t want to ask until now… No, though I did want, I couldn’t ask… I’ll try attacking head on the greatest taboo for us.
“Erm… Zonmi.”
“Yes. What is it?”

“Zonmi, right now, how old are you?”

“…”
Despite trying to make it sound as casual as possible, I noticed Zonmi’s face softly distorting.
“Wh-what…!? What are you suddenly blurting out so late in the game!?”
“… No. I want you to answer me seriously and without being mad.”
“I-I’m not particularly angry! I’m just wondering why would you ask now after such a long time!”
“I mean. Errrm, in the first place, it’s a doubt that I have, but does the body of monsters pile up years like that of humans?”
“…”

As if realizing the meaning of my question, Zonmi kept silent with a meek face.
So.
As I can't tell everyone's ages, I had no other way.
Let's say that ghouls have a lifespan about twice of a human's.
In that case, with a simple calculation, does the growth rate of their bodies halve?
Let's say that's true… What awaits us is a tragic reality.
Judging by outer appearance alone, Zonmi's age is no different than mine.
Since she looks like sixteen, by applying the former theory…

Zonmi Ra McKenzie (32 yo).

It'll be like that.
That's awful!
It would be surreal beyond imagination.
As if unable to just watch me scared of the upcoming dread and trembling like no tomorrow, Zonmi, dispelling my worries with a composed tone,
"Now that you mention it, I haven't told you straight out of my own mouth. I'm sixteen, same as you, Chiharu. I thought you'd had guessed it by the time I transferred into the same class as you, Chiharu…"
"… Is that so? That's good."
Really, really good.
I felt my strength leaving me.
Had Zonmi been a generation[21] older than me… I would've suffered an unfathomable mental shock.
"Erm, I want to ask just for reference, but how many years did you thought I had?"

"Eerrrm… Thirty-two?"

"…"
SLAP
Why?… She's slapped me without a word.
So, as if anxious before my erred guess, the rest of the monster group gathered their glances on me.
"Chiharu-sama. I'll tell you just for the record, but I'm nineteen years old. I'm certainly older than the rest of you[22], but even so, don't misunderstand, so I'm a genuine teenager, thanks."
"Eeeeh. Lilith-san, you're younger than you look."
"Do-does that mean I look aged!?"

“…”
Lilith-san became depressed on the spot, as if she had just received a blow.
Darn.
Have I been too honest?
Now that I think, that may have also been the case with my exchange with Zonmi just now,
It seems that age is a delicate topic for girls, as expected.
“Monster tamer. I’ll tell thee so that thou dostn’t hold any misunderstanding the likes of the prior one, but my age numbers twelve. Dost not get it wrong.”
“…Is it? What a relief that Iris too doesn’t have an unexpected gap with her looks.”
In fact, I was more worried about Iris than in Zonmi’s case.
I mean, in manga and such, this kind of childlike girls often seem to go with the “I’m really ○○ years old” development.
I could wipe away at last the “Iris: loli granny” theory that I held deep down.
Good.
“Erm. Haru, my age is…”
“No. You don’t have to.”
“W-why do you treat only me so badly!?”
“I mean… Aren’t you sixteen, like me?”
“T-that may be true, but… At least worry about it!”
“… Even if you tell me…”
To ask now about her age to a childhood friend I’ve known since elementary school, I find it weird.
“Erm… Miss tits. Manami… Right now has a rea~lly bad feeling about it, but can I ask you a question?”
“Yes. No problem. And… Please, don’t call me ‘miss tits’.”
“Is a monster’s lifespan longer than a human’s one? How many years do they usually live?”
“… That’s right. It depends on the tribe, but a monster’s lifespan is from three to five times that of a human. The undead tribe in particular is known for their longevity.”
“In other words. Just as oniichan worried, they don’t age at the same rate as a human?”
“Yeah, so it comes to that.”
Lilith-san kept on, fixing her glasses in place.
… I’ve recently noticed that Lilith-san has the habit of lifting her glasses before entering exposition mode.
I’ve grown used to Lilith-san’s exposition persona.
“Though there are individual differences, the body of monsters gradually stops aging when it reaches around what would be seventeen years old for humans.

Therefore, they pass more than half of their lives with a physical appearance that would amount to their twenties for humans. In other words, simply put, differently from humans, they suffer a stop in their growths.”

“A-a real ‘forever seventeen’[23]!?”

I don’t know the reason why, but Manami seems to have suffered quite a shock.
“Incidentally, as for why the body of monsters is under such a mechanism, it’s widely regarded as true that lengthening even a bit the age most suited for reproduction is more advantageous for the survival of the species from a biological standpoint.”
“… By the way, what happens with chimeras like me?”
“Right. I think that your case, Chiharu-sama, is a tad particular, but basically shouldn’t differ from other monsters.
If not for illness or injuries, as a low estimate, you’ll live around two hundred years?[24]”
“Uwah!? F-for reals…?”
Should I be calling this good luck?
Up until now, about my perspective on life, I had the feeling of “if I live until I’m 80, that will be pretty damn awesome”, but I’ve unexpectedly got more years to live.
What’s more… I’ll spend more than half of my life with a body in its twenties…
Though I’m relieved that I don’t have to worry about balding for the time being, with such a constitution I definitely cannot attend old class reunions.

“Eh, erm. Miss tits. A regular human… girl, does she have a way to live as long as the monsters?”

Manami asked Lilith-san with an unusually trembling voice.
“I’m very sorry. As I’m not an expert, I’m not aware of the specifics, but as long as I know, there isn’t.”

“Ugaaa

Maybe because of her femininity stressing (*snicker*) miniskirt, I could catch glimpses of her black panties.
It's what's commonly referred as a pointless *panchira*[26].
… Speaking for myself, I didn't think that in this world there could be something like a *panchira* with no meaning whatsoever.
"… Since the mood seems to prevent someone from asking, I'll have to ask myself so, what's the matter, Manami?"
"Be-becaaause… Like that, after fifty years, while oniichan will keep being young, only Manami will be an old granny!"
"… Yeah. Following Lilith-san's explanation, isn't that what will happen?"

"That's… Too cruel! I… Till when will I be able to remain as a little sister character!?"

"… First of all, do you intend of parting from your brother?"
Does she plan to remain as the same character as now even when she's an old granny?
That's somewhat horrific.
"Hey. Aruru. Why do humans raise such a ruckus for such trifling matters?"
"Ufufu. You don't know that because you are still a kid, Meruru. All girls, no matter who or which time period… Reach a point where they come to fear growing old."
"Ch!… Darned Aruru… Just because she was born two minutes earlier than me, she acts like a grown-up."
"…"
I could hear this exchange between the AruMeru[27] sisters coming from the front seat of the car.
Meruru's hate of humans reminds me of Zonmi just when I first met her.
Does the ghoul clan have lots of monsters that hate humans?
When I was thinking about that.

"Ah, look! At last we can see our destiny… I mean, my parent's home!"

Said Zonmi as she pointed with her finger outside the window.
"We can see it, you say… Is there some kind of mistake? There's no way that we can see a house from so far aw…"
As I was speaking, it hit me.
Currently, we couldn't discern any building of the like.
For starters, from this distance, barely able to get a view of the entirety of the town, no matter how big we say the building is, it's nearly impossible to specifically tell it apart.

That is.
With the exception of that single building standing at the very center…
“… Don’t tell me? It can’t be.”
This must be me over thinking things.
To wipe out that possibility that crossed my mind, I shook my head.
“I see. Is that the McKenzie castle, where those who have ruled over ghouls for over a millennium live in?
Its majesty doesn’t lose in any way against those of demons. Impressive!”
“”…””
“Hey. Kyouko.”
“What’s it, Haru?”
“Could this per chance possibly… be that?”
“… Yeah. I think that, perhaps, our guess is spot on.”

“”Zonmi (The ghoul) is a princess[28]!?”

Kyouko & me were left with our mouths agape from the shock.
Practical question. This shock can’t be compared to anything.
Why is that?
Maybe because the girl I’ve been living with for over two months is the princess of a country… Did anyone expect it?
Different from me, who was frankly surprised, Iris kept her usual unruffled look.
“Iris, did you already know? That Zonmi… Was the princess of…”
“If we speak of the McKenzie house, they are the lineage that holds more influence from among the undead tribe. Naturally, any individual who lives in the Netherworld is bound to have heard such appellation at least once.”
“…”
Holy cow!
It seems that those who didn’t know the fact that Zonmi = princess were me & Kyouko & Manami, just the three of us.
… And the one who has suffered the most a shock among us was Manami, my sister.
So shocked she was that both her body and her voice trembled noticeably.
“E-eeeeh—. The zombie is the zombie princess—
I see—. Manami understands. The reason for inviting oniichan to see her parents now was about that?”
“I-it’s not! It’s not like… I intended…”
“Humph. Shameless lies! Don’t get carried away just because you live in such a splendid house!”
“…”
Sis.
What are you being so competitive about since a while ago?

“Besides… I-I have no need in the least for such a splendid home! Oniichan’s thingy is a thousand times more splendid!”
“Is my thingy a biological weapon!?”

“““““…”””””

Right after making a rebuttal.
The ambiance around me seemed to freeze solid.
… Sorry, sorry.
If I get carried away by my sister’s pace, won’t you take me as a pervert?

“… Ah! Wait a minute.”

I then noticed something important.
“Since Zonmi is the Ghoul princess, then Zonmi’s parents who I am to meet…”
“Yes. My father… Satosu[29] Ra McKenzie happens to be the king who reigns over the land of the ghouls.”
“Right—“
Holy cow!
By this trip’s planning, I thought I’d exchange a simple greeting with Zonmi’s parents and spent all of the remaining time mainly sightseeing, but it seems that’ll be not possible.
How come?
Greeting Zonmi’s parents has turned into getting an audience with the king of the ghouls.
Before this unexpected development, we (specially the human world team) felt needlessly dwarfed.

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“But, why did you kept silent about such an important thing until just right now? You had many chances to tell us.”
“… That’s right. I was torn about if I should come clear, but… Claiming it myself would be strange…”
“Yup. Isn’t it?”
“Besides, long ago, back when I was living in the Netherworld, I heard some rumor.

At the human world, girls who call themselves ‘princess’ are, oftentimes, just people weird in the head… So they say.”
“… What a heartless remark.”
Certainly… Girls who come to address themselves as “princess ○○” are more often than not just lunatics or people with mental issues.
… It seems that Zonmi, in her own way, had also been thinking about many things.

Chapter 3: Audience with the king of ghouls

After another 20 minutes or so of riding in the car, we arrived at last to our destined place, the king of ghouls' castle (Zonmi’s parents’ home).
‘I’m very sorry. Since from here on I have to greet the members of my family in turn… Why don’t you all please go to another place to kill time?’
I’m glad that we have reached our destination, but… Zonmi’s word’s left us with unexpected free time.
“… How bothersome. Let’s get done asap with those stiff greetings, I want to be all lovey-dovey with oniichan.”
“There’s no other way, Manami-chan. That ghoul, most probably… Has her own circumstances.”
“… It’s as Kyouko-sama has said.
Zonmi-sama’s… country’s princess status comes wrapped with several obligations.
Seeing the act of her prolonged absence from home, the many members of her family must have some advice to convey to her. Zonmi-sama’s attitude… Must be out of concern so that we won’t feel any discomfort.”
“… That woman. Needlessly reading too much into things.”
“…”
Right now, all of us were in the middle of a city tour led by the AruMeru sisters.
City tour… They’ll have a great reputation, but as we have been for a while doing nothing but go around the castle’s outer wall, the scenery is always the same.
However, no matter how much have we been walking on the same path, walking down the streets of a foreign country is in itself interesting.
Above all, what caught my attention the most were the signboards with ‘Hundred deaths course—Recruiting participants’ written on them with suggestive letters planted each about ten meters[30].
“Lilith-san. Erm… What’s the hundred deaths course?”
Hearing my doubt, fixing her glasses in a way that said “how wonderful that you ask!”, Lilith-san,
“The hundred deaths course is a survival race handed down since long ago by the undead tribe… Isn’t it really easy to understand from its denomination?

Just as it says, it happens to be a harsh race where you have to be resigned to die a hundred times. Compared with the human world, the development of sports has been slower in the Netherwold, but… For its scale, it would be appropriate to call them the Olympics, Netherworld-style.
Isn't it like the human world Olympics even on the point that it's only held once each four years?"
"Heeh. By the way, can you participate even if you are from the human world?"
"… I'd say that I think it's no problem.
Though they were originally used to compare the physical strength, which is the greatest virtue of the ghoul clan, I've heard that now, so as to raise the level, they allow participants from tribes other than the undead.
Although there hasn't been in past races anyone from outside the undead tribe to achieve overall victory.
Let's say that Chiharu-sama becomes the victor… It would be so important a development that it would leave a mark on the undead tribe's history."
"Is that so?"

"Let me give you some advice from the kindness of my heart, you better forget it. If a puny human entered it, he would freeze to death."

Looking back to us who were walking behind her, Meruru chuckled.
I don't know if it was out of disgust for her attitude or just looking for a fight with a fellow little sister character, Manami threatened her with a strong glare,

"What the heck! I've been listening to you in silence for a while… Don't take us humans for fools! Besides… Just you know, oniichan is not hu…"

"Manami-sama. Stop right there."
"Mogaa… Mogaa…!"
Lilith-san obstructed the mouth of Manami, who was about to leak a secret with the impetus, with her tits.
Manami, with her head suddenly pressed against Lilith-san's chest… Soon, due to the lack of oxygen, she finally ended in a daze as if her soul had went out her mouth with a *chin!* sound[31].
Lilith-san… Good job.
The fact that my body is unique in the world, a chimera between human and monster, is, of course, a secret that must not be leaked to outsiders.

If it’s imprudently spread among the public, people like those who massacred Iris’s family… The gang of heinous monster tamers—the Black Tamers, who are after my body, may grow.
“By the way, Meruru. Until when will we be circling around the castle? It’s time you show us inside the city…”
Right after I nonchalantly tried to touch Meruru’s shoulder.

“Rawr——!!“

CHOMP
“Guoh!?”
My right arm got bitten by Meruru, who turned back with the nimbleness of a stray cat[32].
“Hey! Meruru! What are you doing to Chiharu-sama?! Apologize!”
“… Don’t wanna. I absoluuutely won’t apologize! To begin with, it’s the fault of that human there

for touching my body without warning!”
GRRRRR
Meruru kept threatening of biting me again anytime.
S-scawy—
What’s with this little beast…

“My apologies. Chiharu-sama. I apologize on behalf of my sister.”

Aruru frantically bowed my way and politely bobbed her head.
“Right. Yeah. I’m just fine. By the way, are you two really blood-related sisters?”
“… Yes. Meruru and I are genuine blood-related sisters…”
“I-is that so?”
Contrastive to the calm and gentle-mannered Aruru, Meruru’s disposition is emotional but ferocious.
Can two sisters that share blood get so different personalities?
“… On that topic, you two are not step-siblings[33].”
“…”
The words Kyouko rebutted with with scornful eyes were too right and bitter.
“It’s natural for Chiharu-sama to be displeased by the tedium of being shown again and again the same scenery.. However, this was a request from Zonmi-oneesama.”
“… A request from Zonmi?”
“Yes. There are many among us the ghoul clan that, like our Meruru, that feel ill will against humans.
That’s why oneesama requested us ‘while I’m not there, please don’t walk through roads too crowded’…”
“… Is it? Then, there’s nothing to do about it.”
Now that you mention it, I was strongly told that it wasn’t recommended to sight see the land of the ghouls since it’s dangerous for a human to walk through town.
Certainly, it may be dangerous to bring one of us, my thoroughly human sister, to too crowded roads.
“That aside, Chiharu-sama, isn’t your body injured in some place?”
“If it’s for that injury, I’m fine! Since I, look… Though I don’t look like it, I have a strong constitution.”
“There’s no way. Show me the wound on your arm right now. I can administer simple first aid right here.”
“… If you say so.”
I rolled my sleeve to show the wound opened by Meruru’s bite.
This damage, even though it was done by a child… Should I praise it with an “as expected from the ghoul clan”?

Though what's on my right arm can be considered on the level of a joke, it's bound to leave a lasting scar.
But, well, thanks to my resilience, it seems that my body has already healed most of it.

"… Then, excuse me."

With that sentence, Aruru, after pushing aside her forelocks with her hand, engaged in a surprising action.
"… Eh?"
I'd say that no one here wasn't left dumbfounded by her action.

"… Mm. …Chuu. *ROLL*"

Thinking who knows what, Aruru started to instantly roll her tongue over my wound.
"… Mm. How's your injury?… Chiharu-sama."
"E-errrm, quite good!"
"Heeeh. What's so good, oniichan?"
STARE
A stinging chill ran down my spine.
Looking towards the blood thirst, there was my sister, totally recovered from Lilith-san's tit attack, staring daggers at me in a daunting pose.
So as to evade the pressure from my sister, *ahem*, I cleared my throat and
"Isn't it… I feel quite good! (With the arousal) my pain has gone away in a flash!"
I corrected my previous remark.

Licking wounds.

That immoral situation that lately doesn't show up even on spicy love comedy shounen mangas is, in all honesty… Something that any man yearns for.
"Wa-wait. Aruru-chan! Go away from Haru right now! And, hey! You too, Haru, stop grinning!"
"Muu… Those lascivious tongue movements… Look a lot like… One thing from the '48 ultimate techniques for enslaving a man' that I got instructed in by little sister-kun."

“N-no matter if it’s for healing, directly running your tongue over a man’s wound… I-i-i-i-i-it’s not good!”
Contrasting with our various reactions before the sudden sexy happening, the human-hater Meruru remained awfully composed.

“… Hah. Aruru’s bad habit has kicked in again?”

“? What bad habit are you talking about?”
“Look closer. That’s not just licking a wound.
It’s not like I can say it out loud. Aruru still possesses a trait from the ghoul clan that has presently almost disappeared… She’s really weird.”
“…?”

“In other words… Aruru is, right now, eating the human.”

“““““…”””””
We all were taken aback.
N-now that she mentions it, I think that for a while she has been forcefully thrusting her tongue inside my wound!
Sure, In mangas and the like, I think there are lots of them where ghouls are depicted as man-eating monsters”
Of course I don’t have any interest in cannibalism!?

“Aha!… Is the cat out of the bag?”

Aruru showed a full marks perfect smile… It didn’t look like until a while ago she had been preying on my body.
Am I imagining things?
After knowing her true self, that smile… I can’t help seeing in it hints of a devilish smile.
“My apologies. Since Chiharu-sama’s blood was the most delicious I’ve tasted until now, I lost my sense of time and got entranced♥”
“Ah. OK. Mm. That’s… fine.”
“I… Won’t forget this taste in all my life.”
“… I-is that so?”
The chills settled in my back.
Aruru’s expression, sending me a torrid glance while drooling slightly, was enough to plant a trauma inside my heart.

“H-how envious! Enjoying special sex plays like biting or eating and leaving out the real sister, Manami!”

“…”
I’d dare say it’d be since my mood has reached bottom after the unprecedented experience of having my blood sucked by a girl.
For this time only, my heart has been somewhat healed by my sister’s nonsensical speech.

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“Sorry. As excuse for my impoliteness a while ago… Though it may be presumptuous of me… Would you please let us treat you for dinner?”
Us being tired from walking, we went to an eatery introduced by Aruru where we were told we could eat traditional cuisine passed down within the ghoul clan.
Rather than wandering aimlessly around the place, we deemed this more safe and convenient.

“Old man. Bring six of the heavy stuff.”

“… Hah!?”
Right after we took seat, Meruru ordered with an experienced tone.
“Wait, Meruru-chan!? I don’t know much about the ghoul clan’s culture but I think that minors shouldn’t drink alcohol~”
“… Alcohol? What are you saying, giant neechan?”
“T-that way of calling me, it’s not cute so could you stop!?
“That’s right. Calling Kyouko giant neechan is fine since it’s amusing… But I’m also against minors drinking.”
“It’s not fine! Giant neechan is hurtful in many ways!”

“Here. Your heavy stuff!”

““…””
As soon as we had before us the stuff they brought to our seats, we all were left speechless.

By heavy stuff… They mean a heavy serving of raw meat? (Surprise)
Certainly, at the hotel we stayed before Zonmi was fond of eating raw meat…
With that nonsensical arguing, time passed in the blink of an eye.

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“… Chiharu. Sorry for the wait.”
As the appointed time drew near, waiting before the castle’s gate, I heard Zonmi’s voice.
I turned in the direction of the voice.
What now?
The one there was Zonmi, wearing a gorgeous dress worthy of the royalty.
On her head there was a silver tiara endowed with a large sapphire.
The gaudy dress designed with a white and blue basis, was so smooth that a finger would slip by touching it.
…
……
How come?
My heart is throbbing faster than ever.

“Chiharu… Chiharu…”

Let's cool down. Our relationship is that of monster tamer and partner.
No more, no less.
That’s a line that shouldn’t be crossed even by mistake…
This is bad. I, right now, am helplessly conscious of Zonmi’s inner “girl”.
“Chiharu… What are you spacing out about?”
“… Aah. My bad.”
I got back to my senses with Zonmi’s light tap on my forehead.
“Since the Nephilim and the rest are waiting outside, we have no time to spare. Let's get done with our greetings to my father soon, and from tomorrow on we’ll be free to go sightseeing.”
“… Understood.”
Bringing a group to greet a country’s king is bad manners.
While Zonmi and I go greet him, the rest of the group should wait before the castle.

“Thinking once again… Zonmi, you are amazing.”

I spontaneously let out those words.
Thinking about it, I… Haven't I been treating a country's princess in quite a carefree way?
When I met her, I gave Zonmi clothes that should be used for rags, when we don't have the time, we eat instant ramen for dinner… The usual things.
Hearing my words, a shadow fell over Zonmi's face,
"I'm not that amazing.
Besides, the position of princess of a country isn't as pretty as fairy tales put it."
"…?"
She muttered meaningful words while sighing.
"Well. Now stop thinking about that and straighten up. Don't show my father such a slovenly face."
"… Understood."
Between this and that, being tugged by the arm by Zonmi, I went up the stairs to the throne room.

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I… Couldn't but understand even if I didn't want.
Though Zonmi's family has received us with open arms, I could feel on my skin an air of unrest coming from the throne room.

"… Yo! Are you Chiharu-kun? Sorry for making you come here so out in the boons."

"No. Don't mind it."
"…"
About Zonmi's father, it seems that he usually is a gentle person.
That thing about monsters aging less than humans was truth.
His age, should it be around thirty in human terms?
With the same silver hair as Zonmi and a fearless countenance, he was a cool guy.
However, unfortunately sensing a tinge of enmity from his gaze, it seems that he holds no good feelings for me.
"Today, I called you to a face-to-face meeting because there's something I want to request you, Chiharu-kun."
"A request, you say?"

“Yeah. Incidentally, though you have heard it from my daughter, do you know about the incident of the attack on the Grandeel archipelago by the Black Tamers the other day?”
“… Yes.”
Though being someone involved, I can remember it like if it had happened yesterday.
Due to the attack of the Black Tamers, the flourishing tourist spot of the Grandeel archipelago suffered devastating damage in just a day.
And the founder and top member of the Black Tamers was my superior from the monster tamers… Luka-san.
No matter how many days go past… I think I won’t forget that day.
“Originally, many among us the ghoul clan held ideas against cooperating with humans, but… Since that incident, said trend has become more remarkable. In the end, facing that I had to choose an extreme political course of action.”
“Erm… In other words…”
“This country’s princess, Zonmi, serving under a human is a mistake.
We can’t leave our princess in the hands of such a weakling race as the humans. In fact, just the other day we decided in parliament our country’s policy.
Chiharu-kun. Let’s get to the point.

Could you cancel your contract with Zonmi?”

“…”
Ahead of me, who kept silent not knowing how to reply, the one who revealed her feelings was Zonmi.

“Father! What the heck is your intention!?”

Zonmi rudely approached the throne and directed a strong glare to her father as if drilling a hole in him.
“What is my intention… How harsh.
Since the start, wasn’t I against you serving under a monster tamer?
Sure… For those ghouls who favor cooperation with humanity, having one of us ghoul clansmen serving under a tamer may be their lifelong wish.
However, things have changed.
Due to the incident the other day, right now, in this country, almost no ghoul remains on the human supporting faction.
For that, it has become meaningless for you to mingle with humans.”
“…”

Zonmi, with a face of having bit into something bitter, “… Things like meanings of reasons… Let me decide them for myself! I don’t want nobody telling me!”
“That’s right. In most cases, it may be as you say.
However, that reasoning only applies to people raised on fairly regular run-of-the-mill households.
… After all, aren’t you aware of it?”
“…!”
“People born into royalty cannot decide their way of life by themselves.
Since that is the duty of those who stand above the rest of the people.
Zonmi. Henceforth, live listening only to what I say. Do you understand that though you dissent at first you don’t have right to veto?
This is an order.”
“…”
Anyone can see clearly that Zonmi is at disadvantage in this dialectical battle.
Zonmi casted down her eyes and bit her lip in frustration.
“… Chiharu.”
In the end, Zonmi grabbed my arm and forcefully took me outside.
“Chiharu… You don’t have to take seriously what my father has said! I… will follow the way I’ve decided on myself!”
“…”
“Good grief… You have disappointed me.
Things have surpassed the level you could handle with your selfishness alone… If you were smart, you’d understand that.”
Satosu’s lines we heard as we left kept clinging to our ears.
In the end, I, having said no words, just left the room tugged by Zonmi from the arm.

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“Hey. Zonmi.”
“I’m very sorry. I had no idea that it would come to this… I’ve gotten you involved.”
“… No, it’s not like I mind.”

“Let’s go home.”

“… Eh?”
“With this, we have no reason to stay in this country. If it’s now, my father should still be unaware.

If we board a boat asap, to the Grandeel archipelago… I think we could avoid canceling the contract like my father said.”
“…”
In other words, planning to run away before pursuers come?
“But in that case… Wouldn’t we be simply postponing the issue?
It doesn’t solve the basics.
I don’t like it. Going against your family, secretly running away…”
“… Whoa!? So you say you want to cancel the contract with me, Chiharu?”
“No one has said that. Listen, calm down.”
In order to calm Zonmi’s feelings, I placed my hand over her head.
“… Yes.”
“Listen, Zonmi. It’s easy. If those around us are against us, shouldn’t we make the ghoul clan acknowledge us?”
“… But, I don’t think there’s a way that father of mine will acknowledges us.”
“Just one… There is.”
Just for the records, if I wasn’t fully confident about my own idea, there’d be no way I’d say such a thing.

“The survival race passed down among the ghoul clan—the hundred deaths course. Let’s win this race!”

“… Wha?”
Zonmi was dumbfounded, as if charmed by a fox[34].
No.
I’m well aware that I’m saying something preposterous.
However, hasn’t Lilith-san said it?
If we achieve victory at this historical race, we’ll accomplish an exploit that’ll leave its mark on the undead tribe history.
Just for a moment.
If we accomplish an exploit that makes our names written down in history…
Zonmi’s father may change his mind about our contract.
… I know from the start that the odds are against us.
Nevertheless, at least this…
Better than run back home facing the opposition of her family—.
Better than giving up from the start to an unreasonable decision—.
I think that it’s a somewhat acceptable course of action.

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At the same time.

800 kilometers[35] southwest from the continent where those from the undead clan live—Living Lodge, there was a lone island on the distant seas surrounded by a powerful *kekkai*[36].
That island, where a castaway couldn't be draft ashore by the tides, was a perfect island for people with a shady past to hide in.
Eight years ago.
All lifeforms on this island where annihilated without exception by the hand of a single woman.
Her name was Kanzaki Haruka.
She, who was the youngest in history to be promoted to high class monster tamer, with the talent that made her known among her peers as "Luka the Snake charmer", bestowed hope and despair to many people.
Bearing the persona of the founder of the Black Tamers, contrastive with her brilliant career, she made this place into the Black Tamer's secret hideout.
Applying the same technique as the Abyss Gate that allows freely going and coming between the human world and the Netherworld, though at exceedingly small scale, inside the hideout there was installed an special black hole that connected both worlds.
Neither monsters nor humans… A whole new neutral partythird party.
In order to build in this place their renewed world—.

"…d grief. Why me, such an unpleasant duty."
The man nicknamed the Tamer of the Black Beasts—Clarie Shernfelt went to a certain youth's room at the request of his boss.
The youth's name was Lance Patriot.
He was one of the six Firsts[37] that belonged to the Black Tamers.
"… Tch! No matter how many times I come, it's nauseating… This smell…"
In front of the youth's room, drifted a choking stench of rottenness.
Lance Patriot.
According to hearsay, he who was granted by the Association the nickname of Tamer of the Spirits had a hobby of collecting corpses.
For that reason, Lance was kept living in isolation from the rest of the Firsts.
Not even knowing him, his bad reputation had become a well-known topic inside the organization, so Clarie didn't hold good will for him ever since before he met him.

"Clarie Shernfelt here. I've come to bring you a request from the boss."

"…"
He knocked, but there was no response.

This is why I hate dealing with Firsts, deeply regretted Clarie.
It's futile to expect normal communication skills from a First.
They, subjected since tender age again and again to aberrant medication and human experimentation, have all had their hearts twisted.
Since Noelle and the rest of the Firsts are all like that, Lance wouldn't be an exception.
"… I'm coming in."
Cautiously, he turned the knob and opened the door before him.
Dim.
It may take a while for the eyes to get used to it.
And, as he had predicted to some extent, an intense rotten stench.
It's not an environment where an ordinary person can live.
If there's a hell in this world, right now I'm standing in front of it, thought Clarie.
"…!?"
Something weird happened the exact moment Clarie set foot inside the room.
Suddenly, something cold grabbed Clarie's ankle.
(What's this… Is there something at my feet…!?)
He tried to look downwards to assess the situation, but inside the dimly lit room he couldn't even do that.
Clarie took a lighter from his breast pocket, lighted it and tried once again to assess the situation at his feet.
"…!"
He kicked the ground with force due to his great shock.

What was there was the slowly rotting corpse of a girl.

Indeed. From the outer appearance, no matter how you looked at it, it was just a corpse.
(W-what's with this guy… Isn't it a regular corpse!? Has it moved on its own will!?)
For that reason, Clarie couldn't help shivering.
At first, he thought it was a monster from the undead tribe contracted through a ring, but it somehow seems that's not the case.
At least… What has grabbed Clarie's ankle is just the corpse of a human with no magic power.
What's the source that allows this magic power-free lump of proteins to move?… Clarie couldn't comprehend the trick behind it.

"… Mary. Isn't that no good? You can't play pranks on guests."

As soon as he heard someone's voice, the room was completely lighted by a faint clarity.
Alas.
If it was like this, I was better without any light, Clarie thought to himself.
Not just at his feet. This room had heaps of different corpses from all places and times scattered all throughout.
Moreover, all of the corpses in this room… Like the aforementioned girl's corpse, were moving on their own will.
"Sorry. Mary is extremely curious about things from the outside world."
"…"
His approximate age, around the last years of elementary school?
Extremely young… But, ironically the youth's appearance concurs with the information learnt beforehand.
"… Are you Lance?"
"Yes. I've heard everything about the job from Luka-neesan. Leave everything in my hands. I'll definitely achieve a result up to expectations."
"Quite the self-confidence. It's already been said, but the mission this time can't be achieved by ordinary means. To say the least, it's the monster that defeated that peer of yours, Noelle, twice."
"…"
If we have to rely this mission to kids like these… The organization will be done for before soon, thought Clarie.
If we say that Noelle is the one who boasts greatest battle power among the Firsts, her counterpart as the weakest was Lance.
There were other Firsts with excellent battle power, even if not to Noelle's extent.
Why has their superior bestowed this task onto Lance, Clarie held that great doubt.
"Ahaha. Are you worried for me? Thank you very much."
Lance, showing an innocent smile suitable for his age,
"In my opinion, the reason for Noelle-san's defeat was honestly engaging in an upfront battle. Don't worry. I will be more successful."
"… Is that so? I hope that."
Really surprising, Lance's reaction… Leaving out the corpses scattered throughout the room, he's very normal.
At least among the Firsts that Clarie has met up until now, he was the one you could best hold a conversation with.

"… By the way, there's a question I want to ask you."

As we are engaged in normal communication, I surely can try asking.

“Yes. What is it?”
“That corpse there… No, could it be said about all of the corpses in this room? How come each and every of this guys… move?”
“… Eh? You didn’t hear?
I… possess the skill as a necromancer to bestow transient souls on corpses.”
“… Ne-necromancer!?”
Among all the monster tamers, those specialized in employing only monsters from the undead tribe—necromancers.
Like Clarie with beasts or Noelle with rocks, usually, monster tamers specialize in the employment of monsters of a single tribe according to their capabilities, but among them all, monster tamers specialized in the undead tribe are scarce.
However, supposing he really held the skills of a necromancer, it makes sense that he was selected for this mission.
With his advantage of freely manipulating corpses, it may be an effective way to drive Chiharu and his gang, currently located in the undead tribe’s continent, to the wall.
Who would guess that there was someone at the organization who hid this special ability…
This is a sudden… Bringer of hope.
“If there’s no complaints, I’ll take my leave.
It could be said that this time my work consists on just seeing you away and welcoming you back… In other words, I’ll be dismissed until you return from Living Lodge.”
“Understood… By the way, senpai. Before you leave, there’s something I have left to do, so, may I?”
“Yeah. If you make it short, I don’t mind, but… What the heck is it?”

“Nothing much… Just some scolding.”

Lance showed a daring smile and, next moment, his factions grew distorted in the blink of an eye.
… No, should it be said that it turned back to how it was?
Lance’s excessively angry face of unidentified cause, wasn’t it the same that all of the Firsts that Clarie had met until now had?… It gave a feeling beyond insanity.

“You biiiiiiitch! Hey, Maryyyyyy! You can’t touch men other than me! You whore!”

Lance engaged in kicking the decomposing corpse at his feet.

The trampled corpse of a girl filled the room with a smelly gas.

“I don’t need a slut like youuuu!! Quickly, get rid of that filthy soul and get out of my sight!”

“…”
I retract my previous words.
This guy… Is quite the psycho.
Thinking that he had to look after him, even for a short time, Clarie’s mood hit rock bottom.

Chapter 4: Onsen!

Finished with the greetings at the palace, by Zonmi's suggestion, we went to visit the castle's royal villa.
The survival race passed down among the ghoul clan… The hundred deaths course was scheduled to be held three days from now.
For that reason, Zonmi has suggested to us the royal villa as a lodging place until then.
Originally, it seems it had been built for guests that came from far away, and as no one apart from us was using it, it naturally looked like we had reserved it to ourselves.
It's quite ironical to say that, compared to the human world, it feels like we are now living with more luxury.
"Haah… At any rate, today many things have happened…"
To wash away the tiredness from the trip, I went to an onsen bath[38] which I learned of beforehand.
After consulting with the girls, it seems that there's only one big bath that has fixed hours alternating between male and female bath.
Inside love comedy mangas, at this time of the entering-the-bath scene, without fail it will lead to a mixed bath event, but of course this is the real world.

Thinking about it calmly, the chance an event like that occurs is about 0.
I checked the time on my cellphone.
"Good…"
Since I've checked many times, there's no doubt.
This is the male bath.
I threw my clothes into the basket at the changing room.
I opened the door, making a rattling noise, and.

"Uo… It's pretty large…"

What entered my vision was a scenery of a stone bathtub surrounded by pine trees that overall overflowed with a Japanese taste.
After lightly rinsing my body, I entered the tub.
As for the essential bathtub… It was quite disappointing.

To sum it up in one word, lukewarm.
Since it was made with the weak to heat ghoul clan in mind, that may be partly inevitable.
If a ghoul entered forty degrees[39] hot water, maybe they'll start dissolving into the bathtub.
"Fui…"
Once you get accustomed to soaking in warm water, it's not that bad.
However, if you take a long bath you may catch a cold.
… I pray that from the showers at least comes hot water.
And, as I was having those thoughts, I heard noises coming from the changing room.

""Ah""

I think that we raised our voice at about the same time.
W-what's with… This…
Am I dreaming?

Before my eyes was Zonmi in the nude.

The extent of the shock leaving me unable even to blink… I froze as if the time had stopped.
However, it looks that it was the same for Zonmi, she just kept staring to me, standing upright without even covering herself with the towel.
During that time concentrated to the utmost, I thought it once again.
Zonmi's body is beautiful, isn't it?
That is, despite not having an overly destructive bust size like Manami or Lilith-san.
Nevertheless, I don't think that Zonmi's body loses in femininity even for a bit when compared with them.
Zonmi has… long and slender arms and legs.
Smooth skin, white like virgin snow.
And I think that her chest size is a bit above the average of her age group.
Those, that certainly came from heavens splurging, deserve to be called perfect cheat specs.
"…!?"
The instant after I absentmindedly thought that.

"Chiharu… Hide!"

As if recalling something, Zonmi suddenly… Pushed down my body.
SPLAAAASH
Raising a huge splash, I was submerged to the bottom of the tub.
As it was expected, I was in close contact with Zonmi's body.
Even if I say so myself, how did we end up in such a situation was a big mystery…
Zonmi, so as to keep submerged (?) my body that wanted to surface, using both hands and feet… and the butt too, pinned down my body.
"Nu. What is it… This white and murky fluid…?"
"Heeh. This has been made fairly standard… I never thought I could enter an onsen at the land of the ghouls."
""…""
These voices, don't tell me… Iris and Kyouko!?
Though belatedly, at that moment I understood the reason behind Zonmi's actions.
It seems that, for an unknown reason, I was brazenly using the bath during the time slot reserved for the girls.
Because of that… Zonmi, who had noticed my presence ahead of time, so as to avoid the other girls running into me, submerged my body into the tub.
Be that as it may, that's weird.
Before entering the bath, I had checked many times the time, so… What could have gone wrong? … Don't tell me!?
Then, a thought flashed in my mind.
What I had been zealously checking back then was my cell phone's clock.
My cell's clock… I had it set with the clocks of the hotel we were lodging at before.
Could it be that… As we've moved to the undead tribe's continent, there's a slight time difference!?

"Aaaa

“…”
After so much time… You, did you usually do that at home?
… If we return to the human world, I must be really careful of not having a bath until my sister is done.
“Manami-sama… It’s a pity that thing about Chiharu-sama’s… Soup, but… Raising your voice inside a bath for public use is a lack of manners.”

“That’s unneeded assistance. Titty wo… No, titty monster[41]!?”

“Why have you corrected yourself like that!?”
“That’s because… You see…”
“And why are you now staring at my chest!?”
“I… Manami-chan is out of the question, but I think that Lilith-san is lacking enough manners. The heck, what do you have to eat to grow them this big?”
“Wh-what is it, young ladies!? Could you not randomly cooperate and stare at my breasts!?”
“Muu… Now that thou mention it, certainly… The succubus’s mammaries are magnificent.
Well… L-let me check the sensation for when, in the future, my mammaries grow bigger too.”
“Hey. Iris-sama!? Please stop with the incomprehensible sophistry and touching other people’s breasts!”
“…”
G-girls talk[42]!
I never heard it happened in the real world, but it’s the kind of girls talk that is, for some reason, an over-the-top staple situation on the late night anime[43] world!
Moreover, it’s the comeback of the superb flow of events where the flat-chested character plays with the well-endowed character’s boobs!
I shouldn’t spit out the pattern.
I, right now, am feeling the beauty of this honed style…

“Chiharu… Chiharu…”

“…*bubbles**bubbles**bubbles* (W-what is it?)”
“Now it’s your chance, while they are caught with the succubus’s breasts! Try to leave this place by diving!”
“…*bubbles**bubbles**bubbles* (Understood)”
Thanks, Zonmi.
Thanks, Lilith-san’s boobs.

Even though there’s no ill will, if I, being a man, get exposed here, things wouldn’t end well.
…
……
Slowly.
Slowly.
Without raising noise, I gradually parted from Zonmi.
I’m nearing the limit of my lung capacity, but if it’s some tens of seconds more, I should be able to endure it.
A bit more.
Now, if I remove my leg from within Zonmi’s thighs I can safely break out.
With the mission’s end almost on sight, just when I was feeling relieved, an accident happened.
A part of my body… The hardest place of my lower body ended up hitting Zonmi’s body.
“Hyau!?”
All of a sudden, Zonmi raised a coquettish voice.

“C-could you not touch me with weird places!?”

“*bubbles**bubbles**bubbles*… (No. The knee!? Wasn’t it the knee!?)”
“Uu… Chiharu, you moron… Pervert.”
“…”
Even though I tried to somehow clarify the misunderstanding, in this situation, it didn’t work.
“? Hasn’t the zombie suddenly raised a weird voice?”
“What’s the matter, ghoul? Are you feeling under the weather?”
“”…””
T-this is bad.
Even though Lilith-san managed at great pains to attract their attention, this accident just now gathered all stares on us.
And my lungs, like a tense string that got cut, suddenly demanded oxygen.
… It can’t be!
I’m at my limit!
Uooooooooh!
I can’t endure iiiiiiiiiiiiit!
I can’t! It’s coming out! It came ooooooooooooooooooooooooout! (I mean the oxygen).
“… Buha!”
Reaching the limits of my endurance, I brought my face over the water.

“”””””…”””””

I'd say I won't forget this scene in all of my life.
When, in the future, I'm a gramps and die, I think I want to peacefully breath my last inside a soft hospital bed while remembering this scene.
What I first saw were Kyouko, Iris, Manami, Lilith-san… Those four girl's blank faces.
Zonmi, the only member who was aware of the circumstances, had her face totally flushed red in a daze.
And as I gradually shifted my glance down, I could grasp with my eyes the stark naked figures of the five girls.
If there's a heaven in this world, right now I'm standing in front of it, so I thought.
Some seconds after that.
Though there occurred the mysterious incident of the onsen's cloudy water becoming dyed red as if by tomato juice, that's yet another story.

× × ×

"Good grief. No matter if there was no ill will, to brazenly enter the women's bath… Reflect deeply on what you have done."
"… Yes."
After apologizing again and again to the girls, I was taking a stroll along the premises with Zonmi, after she bathed.

"And what even more unforgivable… You got excited by my body… And moreover one part of your body even got hard…"

"Erm, Zonmi. By my honor, I tell you that was…"
"I-I mean, I'm… A sixteen… Years old girl.
That Chiharu got that reaction due to none other than me… Though it makes me a liiiiiiiiiitle bit glad… This and that are different stories. Carried away by your lust on such a public place… Shame on you!"
"Y.yup."
What do I do… This mood…
Being too late to stop her misunderstanding, it was a troublesome atmosphere.

"… Now that I think of it, recently we haven't had the chance to speak like this, just the two of us."

Giving up on dispelling Zonmi's misunderstanding, I boldly tried to divert the conversation's topic.
"…Now that you mention it, that's true."
"If you like, this night… Could you tell me many things about you?"
When I asked, Zomi suddenly looked away, as if embarrassed.
"… W-what the heck do you mean by that?"
"I've fully realized since coming to this town.
That you had two little sisters. That you were the ghoul clan's princess.
If you think about it… I didn't know a thing about you, Zonmi, until I came here.
That's why
Like what kind of childhood did you have.
Like why you thought about going to the human world, I want you to tell me about those things with as much detail as you can."
When I blurted to her my honest thoughts, Zonmi showed an awkward smile,
"… It doesn't matter but I have neither shared memories with you, Chiharu, like the Nephilim does, nor a tragic past like the red dragon. I don't think there's anything that could catch your interest, Chiharu…"
"? Don't decide those things before speaking about them. By the way, I want to know everything about you."
"…… Once again, thoughtlessly saying like that lines that set one's teeth on edge."
Looking down as if troubled by where to look at, Zonmi spoke bitterly in a provoking tone.

"That's right, isn't it? Occasionally reminiscing is not that bad…"

Nevertheless, as if resigning herself, Zonmi started to speak in an unconcerned tone to hide her embarrassment.
"First, about my childhood… As a child, I was, crudely speaking, a girl with no independence."
"Is that so? How surprising."
"Yeah. The me at that time was dedicated to studying as per my parents' command and attended many different lessons. I feel that the me back then lived just to comply with my parents' expectations.
And the expectations of those around me… Raised the hurdle to clear once I cleared it . As my school results, different from a certain half-baked pair of siblings[44] were excellent, the expectations on me grew at an accelerated pace.

At one point, voices appeared that endorsed me as the first queen in the ghoul clan's history. Since at the time… My parents had yet to produce a male heir."
"…!? Isn't that amazing?"
"It is. The me back then… In the eyes of strangers may have looked like a child that could do anything perfectly with no effort.
However, since my conduct, after all, was a reaction born from a guilty conscience about the attention everyone had on me due to my excellent results… It's not like it had any purpose.
That's why I ended up snapping.
When my parents had their long-expected son, the expectations of everyone shifted from me to the baby in less than a month after the birth.
To me that was tremendously vexing… I felt like all of my efforts up to date got denied… My efforts until then were in turn exchanged in my heart for opposition against my family."
"…"
I didn't know.
Though not to the extent of Iris… Zonmi too has suffered bitter experiences in the past.
"Reached the turning point, about the human world… Was it once I graduated from middle school?
Though everyone naturally expected me to further my studies, I, overcoming the opposition from my family, chose the path of being a monster tamer's partner."
"Why expressly that?"
"Going straight to the point, it was to walk down the path that I myself chose instead of the rails set by someone. To me, the path of becoming a monster tamer's partner… Looked like the perfect place where I could test my own power, without my lineage mattering in the least."
"Was that so? How strong of you. Zonmi, you…"
"…"
Instead of the safe asphalt before her, she dared to choose the difficult path of cutting through by herself.
Only people with absolute confidence in their own abilities can attempt that stunt.
Zonmi, with a perplexed countenance, "haah…", sighed,
"… What you've said also goes to you, Chiharu… No, rather, aren't you the one who's strong?"
"? What the heck do you mean?"
"I mean… You too… Despite having thousands of other paths, you chose by your own free will to walk down the path of a monster tamer."
"… Ah!"
Now that she mentions it… Isn't it like that?
Though I wasn't too aware until now, My mentality of having accepted the unusual lifestyle of a monster tamer may be extraordinary.

“Besides, I, by no means… Was not the strong monster you think I was, Chiharu.
At first, I doubted if the path I chose myself was the correct one.
There were many night when I couldn’t sleep out of uneasiness.
However, since I met you, Chiharu, and we made the contract, I stopped having bad dreams.
Chiharu… How much indebted I am to you… I don’t think you’ll know it in your life.”
“… That, maybe… Is the same for me…
I too, if you were not with me, Zonmi, would live an aimless life without knowing even the kind of person I am.”
“…”
Zonmi looked down, in silence.
A quiet night where snow falls heavily and piles up.
There’s just a comfortable silence.
“… Fufu. It’s somewhat embarrassing. Chiharu, you shouldn’t let your body get so cold. Why don’t we continue with this story after we have succeeded in convincing my father?”
“… That’s right. Let’s do as you say.”
Overcoming her family’s opposition… I think that Zonmi’s determination of following by herself the path that she herself cuts through.
However, Zonmi was about to run into another wall.
Unless I achieve victory on this race without fail and convince Zonmi’s father… Zonmi will probably fall again into that bitterness.
Only that… Is the obstacle we must overcome.
Finished my night stroll with Zonmi, once I had laid down in my bed, I renewed my resolve.

Chapter 5: Survival race on the snowy mountain

Three days after arriving to the undead tribe's lands.
At last the day has come. It's the day the hundred deaths course is held on.
On the huge three thousands meters tall snowy mountain that had become the race course, we resolutely went to the hundred deaths reception hall at its foot.
Though that's fairly obvious, right now we have the highlight right before our eyes.
In the reception hall there were gathered monsters of varied looks that came from all of the Netherworld.
According to Zonmi.
Though in the quickly developed Netherworld it's become customary to live in human form for the purpose of convenience, it seems that that custom has yet to permeate into every nook and cranny of the Netherworld.
For that reason, among the monsters gathered at the reception hall there's a fair amount that have not adopted human forms. Monsters that look like mummies and monsters that look like vampires… It looks like the core of the participants comes from the undead tribe.
Before the reception hall there are many stalls in a row, there's a mood like it's some sort of festival.

"Muu. This…Intoxicatingly mellow fragrance that resembles a forbidden fruit crafted by the devil… Candied apples!?"

"Do candied apples have such an exaggerated smell!?"
"Monster hunter. I have recalled that I had some business to take care of. I shall go wait in line around here."
Iris slurped the drool that spilled from her mouth while wiping it with her robe's sleeve.
"… So it seems. Do we need to remain together from here on?"
Nonetheless, Iris being alone leaves me with a dreadful unrest.
She may have that haughty attitude, but a stranger wouldn't have it difficult to lure her with a piece of candy.

“Chiharu-sama. Rather than worrying for others you should first worry about yourself.
If it’s about Iris-sama, leave it to me. I’ll watch her so that she doesn’t get hurt.”
Lowering her voice so as to not be heard by those around us, Lilith-san secretly whispered to my ear.
“Lilith-san. Thank you very, very, very much.”
That’s right.
It’s as Lilith-san has said.

I have to attain victory in the race and get my existence as a human acknowledged among the ghoul clan.
It would be unsightly to forget about my main objective because of being worried about others.
It seems that the development of the competition will be broadcasted in real time via monitors and the rest of your group can cheer you from there.
I haven’t told this to Kyouko and Manami, who had disappeared after saying they had issues to attend, though.

“… Chiharu. Let’s go to the tent on the other side of the reception hall.”

Zonmi tugged my sleeve while looking around, worried by the public notice.
Even supposing that she hadn’t come back to the Netherworld in a long time, if word gets out that the country’s princess was at this place, things would get a bit rowdy.
For that reason, today Zonmi was wearing glasses & a hood that covered the upper part of her face so as to disguise herself a little.
How troublesome it is to be famous.
“Now let’s follow the succubus’s words and finish with the registration asap.”
“Understood.”
This way, Zonmi & I, while feeling grateful for Lilith-san’s actions, set foot on the reception hall.

Having the majority of the monsters finished with their registration, the inside of the tent was more deserted than I had expected.
Speaking of the most important registration… It happened so easy that it was even disappointing.
“Hey, Zonmi. Wasn’t the hundred deaths course the biggest event for the ghoul clan?”
“Yes. Didn’t I explain it to you beforehand?”

“… But, isn’t it weird?
They don’t even hold any preliminaries for such an important event… You can participate this easily on the same day.”
Lilith-san called the hundred deaths course the Olympics, Netherworld-style, but to me, that example didn’t fit it.
Surely, judging by the number of participants and the scale of the venue alone, this race may deserve to be called the Olympics, Netherworld-style.
However, with only this, it’s unnatural that despite being a large-scale event, there’s absolutely no selection of the participants.
Well, since if they did have preliminaries there’s no doubt that we wouldn’t be able to participate in this race, it’s not like I have complaints.
“… It’s easy. Though it sounds cruel, this competition not having preliminaries is due to being more exciting to mix strong people with weak people.”
“? What does that mean?”

“Since there’s no rule that guarantees the participant’s lives, that way they get naturally sieved… As expected from the Netherworld’s sports, how nasty.”

“Whoa, Kyouko!? You… What have you been doing until now!?”
The one who answered my question instead of Zonmi, was Kyouko, who appeared all of a sudden.
“What have I been doing… Don’t you understand seeing me like this? Sorry, but… Waiting and cheering is boring.”
On Kyouko’s chest there was a badge with a registration number that identified her as a participant in the hundred deaths course. In this badge, it seems there was a transmitter that served to locate the participant in case they got stranded on the snowy mountain.
“Eeeh. Could it be that you're also participating?”
“What’s with that face of open disgust?”
“Because…”
It’s simply that my chance of winning has gone down.
But I desisted in my heart on giving in and saying aloud my honest feelings.
… Is there a need of saying that now?
If it’s Kyouko, since she knows what’s the reason behind this competition, she should be able to properly read the mood.
For the one in a million chance that I can win… There’s no doubt that she’s giving me all of her support.
Thinking that I have one more ally, it’s rather reassuring.

“Ufufu. I won’t lose to the zombie!”

“…”
Laughing fearlessly, Manami wore a badge with a registration number on her chest.
The one who can’t read the mood in the least has comeeeeeee!
“Hey, Manami… Is there any merit from you participating in the race?”
“There’s merit. Oniichan. Did you forget the purpose of this race?”
“As if I could forget.”
I’m repeating myself, but by winning this race I’ll have the ghoul clan acknowledge humans.
“Then there’s no problem if Manami wins ♪”
“… Eh?”
“I mean. Since we aim to show to those cheeky zombies the true value of us mighty humans[45]… Rather, wouldn’t it be more effective if Manami wins?”
“Yeah. Now that you say… It is?”
Even if it’s acceptable, I want to be spared from that development.
I mean… Could you picture it?
Just thinking on having to tell Zonmi’s father “my sister has won, so accept my contract with Zonmi!”… Too lame.

“… Besides, ever since coming to this town, I’ve been having a bad hunch. More than this, so that the relationship between oniichan and the zombie doesn’t advance, I have to cut off this bad progress early on… Ufufufufu.”

SPARKLE Manami’s eyes let out a dangerous gleam.
“…”
I think that I have found the mightiest foe right beside me.
If I’m not careful… She’s quite capable of tripping me up.
I think that my sister’s physical capabilities, strongly inherited from my mother, a living legend among monster tamers, still haven’t shown their whole depth yet.

“Chiharu. You can’t afford to lack in concentration. No matter who participates… We absolutely must not lose this race.”
“… Yeah. That’s right.”
Though I’ve said it just before, as expected, I think it will be difficult to persuade Zonmi’s father if Manami wins this race.
At the end of the day, the one who wins should be none other than me.
And if we’re speaking of wanting even more… I want to attain a great difference with the second place.
If I manage to stand out like that… From the results of the race it won’t be difficult to propose a negotiation with Zonmi’s father.
Having recognized the situation anew thanks to Zonmi’s warning, my enthusiasm got renewed.

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When I reached the snowy mountain that had become the racecourse, there were already lots of participants starting to position themselves as they pleased on the starting line.
Those numbers… five hundred, no, making a low estimate, there were around six hundred?
Since the girls had gotten delayed, changing their clothes, I who had finished my own arrangements stood all alone on the snow.
Since I had no choice but spacing out, I think I’ll check the rules of the hundred deaths course one more time.
The rules are easy.
The one from the participants who reaches the top of the snowy mountain the fastest is the victor.
However, monsters that can fly are forbidden of doing so.
Engaging in direct attacks against other participants is also forbidden.
… Though, at first glance, it may look like a half-baked competition, negligence is taboo.
As even at the best of times just traveling on a path with deeply piled up snow can have you break a bone, if you add going up a steep slope, many a monster will easily have his stamina exhausted.

“Haah… Even though I went out of my way to warn you… You’re quite eager to die.”
“Chiharu-sama… We have heard the circumstances from oneesama. Go for it!”

“Meruru. Even Aruru…!! Have you come to cheer me on!?”

“… Humph. How conceited. We were going to participate in this event since the very start.”
“… Eh. Could it be that you will be participating in this race?”
“No. Chiharu-sama. We are not contestants…”
The instant after Aruru started to tell me something.
“Ah! Isn’t the one there princess Aruru!?”
From somewhere on the venue, someone shouted that.
“So does that mean that the person next to her is princess Meruru!?” “It’s true! I… It may be my first time seeing them in person.” “I had heard rumors, but… They are very beautiful girls…” “The truth is… I’ve only participated in this race because I wanted to meet them.”
“…”
As a chain reaction from that voice, other voices kept popping up and the venue became an uproar at once.
“… Tch! They noticed us?”
Meruru muttered in a spiteful voice unbecoming of a beautiful girl.
“Chiharu-sama. Continuing with my earlier statement, we are not contestants in the hundred deaths course, we’ve been entrusted with the award delivery… We’ve been invited to this event as special guests.”
“I see. So it was like that?”
“For that… I case that you manage to win this race, Chiharu-sama, I think that we’ll meet again at the awards ceremony.”
“Human. Do your best not to die.”
“… Understood. Thanks!”
Thereafter.
The AruMeru sisters, so as to slip past the glances from those around, quickly left my side.
I thought that with Zonmi’s case, but… as expected, being a country’s princess may bring with it various hardships.

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Several minutes later.
In the blue sky without a single cloud… The fireworks that signaled the start of the hundred deaths course were launched.
At the same time, around six hundred monsters, raising a sound like a tremor, strived to be the first to reach the summit.
“Chiharu… Don’t leave my side!”
“… Y-yup.”
Had I not firmly grasped her hand, pushed by the surge of people, I would have lost Zonmi in a flash.

After standing for a bit at the start line, the forerunner group disappeared from sight before you could say Jack Robinson and at last we could chat peacefully.
“… But, is this right? It seems we’ve blundered charging ahead at full strength from the beginning.”
“There’s no problem. In this competition people who make a head start are not bound to have an advantage.”
“…”
Certainly, Zonmi’s speech seemed to have a point.
It seems that around three quarters of the participants had rushed out with the starting signal, and in contrast, the remainding quarter seemed to be taking it leisurely.
According to Zonmi,

In this race, along the way, diverse traps were set and in the worst case, it seems that one has to be prepared to face the danger of losing one's life.
This means that starting in the vanguard = demerit of being more prone to falling into a trap, while those at the back, as they have the merit of being able to retain their stamina, they can progress better in the race.
"… Nonetheless, it's not like we can remain here forever doing nothing. Chiharu, we will go on soon."
"… Yup."
Like this, we started the race about one minute after the starting signal.

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After that.
I think we kept going up the mountainside for around thirty minutes.
Have we been able to avoid the traps as Zonmi expected?
After going up the snowy mountain for a while, we found a bunch that appeared to be the leading group.
"… Chiharu. Be careful. Up there… There's something."
Right after Zonmi's warning.
There were a succession of tremors in the ground and, as a result, big holes appeared here and there.
And from inside those holes, around a hundred monsters appeared all at once.
Their length is about… 5 meters[46] or so?
They were cute monsters with tufty white fur and round eyes.
Though it's not like their size is especially big compared to the monsters that I've met till now, the highlight was their numbers.
Surprisingly, it may be the first time I've seen so many of the same monster before me at the same time.
"Zonmi… What are these monsters?"
"These children are snow moles. Properly speaking, they are not monsters, they are beings called magical beasts that don't have intelligence. At a glance, they have charming looks, but their true nature is that of ferocious carnivores. They hunt other beings in groups and eat their prey alive."
"…"
So that means this situation is quite dangerous?
… Zonmi may say so, but I can't quite believe it.
First, this lovely creature, there's no way it could do such a wretched…
At that time when a question mark was floating above my head.

"Guh! Ugaaaaaah!"

A mummy man (?) that was running in the attack group[47] raised a cry of agony having his head gnawed by a snow mole.
I withdraw my statement.
With such a cute face. What a wretched thing to…
“Zo-Zonmi. That guy, look! Isn’t that guy in danger!?”
"Chiharu. We cannot afford to worry about other people.
Moreover, I told you. This competition is more exciting with some weak people mixed in.
More or less, having victims makes the show more exciting.”
“…”
Thinking about it, Zonmi boldly speaking without hesitation about these dreadful things gives me the chills.
However, I agree with Zonmi’s words that we can’t afford to worry about other people.
That’s fine.
I mean, hey, that guy, he’s a mummy man. He’s from the undead tribe.
Being from the undead tribe, he wouldn’t die just by having his head gnawed.
Surely… Perhaps…
In any case… What Zonmi said about people who have a head start not being bound to have an advantage starts to make sense.
Why is that so?
Because people who run at the front must conversely face more obstacles (?) in their way.
“… Here they come!”
So, it seems that this time the snow moles have shifted targets to me.
Their numbers, one, two, three, four… five moles.
About the same number of snow moles rushed on to Zonmi.

“… Pukyuu!”

The lovable cry of the snow moles was heard.
Zonmi, with the umbrella she had produced out of nowhere (really, how come she always produces it out of nowhere?), fought back the snow moles.
“… Be that as it may, you’re amazingly nimble.”
The attacks she directed against the snow moles, all critical hits to their weak points (the crown of their heads), utterly managed to turn the tables around.
As she managed that chain of attacks without stopping her feet nor going off from her running course, I don’t know the depths of Zonmi’s true power.

“… You too, Chiharu. Haven’t you managed to avoid the snow moles’ attacks with the least movements without even glancing to the enemies’ actions? I, sometimes… Become astonished from the speed of your growth.”
“… I don’t think it's like that.”
Like Zonmi said, the pacifist me, by twisting half of my body, suitably avoided the attacks.
It’s not difficult.
Being the case that I receive Zonmi and Kyouko’s attacks everyday, the attacks from the snow moles comes at super slow motion[48].
“A fellow with an astonishing growth speed… It seems that there’s one other.”
“… I see. So it seems. Time and time again, I keep being surprised by you two pair of siblings.”

“Haaaaaaa… Release now! My femininity power… FULL☆RE☆LEASE!!”

Though I’ve been for a while trying to not notice it as much as possible, surprisingly indeed, the person among the current leading group of the race that was furthermore the head runner… Was unmistakably my little sister, Kusumi Manami.
In other words… I have the vague fear that, presently, the lead racer is my sister.
“That chick… Isn’t she even stronger than before…?”
Before the top runner Manami rushed on snow moles in a number that couldn’t be compared with what happened to us, but…

“Eat this special move! Sister-in-love-that-gets-horny-by-heartrendingly-thinking-of-her-older-brother… Kick!”

“Pukyuu!?”
The snow moles, kicked with force in their nether regions, writhed on the snow raising heartbreaking screams.
This little sister of mine.
She has no mercy…
Manami kept defeating with one blow any magical beast that obstructed her way and continued in a situation of running solo.
“It seems that our biggest rival in this race is the little sister.”
“… It may be.”
“Moreover, her. Not only she has great speed, it seems she’s constantly running along a route with winds favorable to her.”
“…? Is that possible?”

“That… Even I don’t know.
However, Living Lodge’s mountain are famous for their strong winds, said to be the strongest in the world.
Supposing she possesses a sixth sense to intuit the direction of the wind…
She will pose a threat to us.”
“…”
Darn!
I’ve been having a faint hunch, but to think that we’ll have to fight my sister for the top position…
My pride as an older brother is hanging on this match… I feel that I can afford less and less to lose.
“Let’s go. The race will soon enter its mid stage. The obstacles and troubles in the course are expected to increase.”
“… Yup,”
Struck by Zonmi’s words, I increased my speed even more and pursued my sister’s back.

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After that.
Have we been going up the mountainside around one more hour?
As the race has reached its mid stage, the number of quitters went up and the figures of the contestants other than us gradually disappeared.
And… Due to the troubles, the mountainside seems to get more harsh as we approach the summit.
Currently. Zonmi and I are climbing a rocky surface that stands perpendicular, at almost 90 degrees.
“Chiharu. If we reach that depression, we can seek an easy route afterwards.”
“T-this way?”
Since it’s my first time rock-climbing, at first I didn’t know how to, but I think I can make up for my lack of experience with physical ability.
“Haah… Manami has taken quite the lead.”
“There’s no problem. The race is about to enter its final stage.
The magical beasts that will appear from now on should be so strong that they cannot be compared with those up until now.
Even with the tenacious physical ability of the little sister and her battle sense… She’s human. If it’s just simple battle power, we win.”
“In other words… We can still make a comeback.”
“Exactly!”
Said Zonmi with an intense glance while raising her index finger with a snap.
… To reach here, Zonmi has had to do many unreasonable things.

When we were climbing the snowy part, as instead of going in the back she went at the front, she must have suffered several cramps.
Besides… While we climbed the cliff, she had to go on while giving advice to me, a total novice.
Even now, most likely, despite conducting herself with stout-heartedness, Zonmi's weariness must be reaching its peak.
So as to not bring to waste Zonmi's efforts… I must win this race at all costs…
"Zonmi!? Duck!"

"… Eh?"

I forcibly pushed down the open-mouthed and dumbfounded Zonmi against the snow.
"Chi-Chiharu…? What the…?"
"Listen. Be quiet for a bit."
"!?"
Next instant.
A wind so strong that it was unthinkable by the human world's common sense blew over our heads.
"… Kuh!"
The gust of wind that blew boisterously, bore such strength that it almost blew us up, stooped as we were.
Eventually, the wind passed by and Zonmi, fixing her posture and with a face that said "I can't understand", addressed my previous actions.
"… I can't believe it. How could you, just now… Know that the wind was going to blow?"
"No, just. It's not like it's specially groundless, but… Somehow I think I heard the wind's sound."
"…"
Ever since my power as a monster awakened, my five senses have reached the level of your average wild animal.
It's not like I can't do something my sister Manami can.
Thinking like that, in the time it took me to reach here I went through hell trying to get the knack of it, but… It seems that at last results begin to appear.
Finding and running along the route with favorable wind like my sister does… Though I can't produce such a superhuman feat, if it's just big winds like the one just now… It seems that somehow I too am able to perceive them.
"Holy cow… You pair of siblings never cease to surprise me.
Grasping the sound of the wind… I thought it was impossible unless one was a legend-class monster.

If we manage to keep going in the race hereafter… Those are quite reassuring words.”
“…!?”
While I was basking in the not all that bad feeling of being praised by Zonmi.
I sensed from behind, the presence of a strong magic power.

“One trouble after another… Is it?”

“… So it seems.”
Will the magic beast-sama appear soon?
It may be a result of being in the race for so long.
Besides grasping the sound of the wind, I… have come to acquire the trick of perceiving the enemy’s whereabouts by the presence of their magic power[49].
… However, the enemy this time has an atmosphere in no way like those until now.
Just by pure quantity of magic power it’s like that, but the essential difference that monster has is the darkish and wicked magic power it has attached…

“Guuooooooooooooooooh!”

So, we could promptly see the owner of the magic power I sensed earlier before us.
“What the heck… This guy…”
The one that appeared before us was a red dragon—well, a bit different.
That guy certainly was built into the shape of a dragon, but… In length alone, it was maybe twice Iris’s.
The color of its scales and the shape of its wings were also different from Iris’s.
Somehow… It seems that it’s a dragon from a species other than a red dragon.
However, that wasn’t the point that surprised me.
Its skin was slowly rotting and it let out a foul smell.
The scales crumbling and peeling away, it was mostly just bones.

A completely zombified dragon.

If I had to concisely describe its appearance, those would be suitable words.
“Zonmi… Is this guy a magical beast…?”
“…”
I asked Zonmi a question related to the explanation about monsters and magical beasts I was given before.
Magical beasts are for the most part monsters with no intelligence.
The same like humans and cattle, being both mammals, each are given different treatment though, to monsters, magical beasts are existences not far from wild animals.
However, is it possible?
Is there a being that, while having the shape of a dragon, is an unintelligent magical beast?
“This… Is surprising. Right now, the being we have before our eyes is not a magical beast.”
“! Does that mean, after all… It’s a monster!?”
“…”
Zonmi, slowly shaking her head,
“That’s still wrong.
Speaking properly, that dragon there was once a monster… In other words, now it has become just a soulless lump of proteins[50].”
“What the heck does that mean…”
“… Well. Not even I can make heads or tails of it.
However, right now, the only think I can say is that we don’t have even a second to waste discussing about what's the thing before us.”
“!?”

“… Here it comes!”

The completely zombified dragon…
That’s right. Why don’t we address it from now on as skull dragon?
The skull dragon moved its huge forelimb so as to trample down on my body.
“… So fast!?”
There is a remarkable difference with the attacks of the snow moles back then.
If I was careless, this attack just now could have smashed my head.

“Teeeeeeeee!”

However, no matter how many enemies or if it’s an unidentified strong foe, I am fortunate to have such a reassuring partner.

Having just now gone around the side of the enemy, Zonmi has already thrust the tip of her umbrella at the back of the neck of the skull dragon.
A critical hit.

“Guuooooooooooooooh!”

Suffering a severe blow on the back of its neck, the skull dragon spouted out a large quantity of blackish body fluids.
… Game[51].
Were this opponent before us normal, the game would have been decided long ago.
However.

“Kyah!?”

Reality is different.
The one who received damage then was Zonmi, instead.
The skull dragon shook its big head and threw Zonmi with force over the ice.
“Are you joking… No damage with that just now!?”
But, thinking about it, it may be quite natural.
Zonmi has just described the skull dragon as the soulless remains of a monster.
In that case… No matter how we attack it it’s meaningless since the enemy is already dead!?
Such…

Tell me, how do we defeat an already dead opponent!?
“… Kuh!”
An attack from the skull dragon.
This motion is very bad news.
As if trying to absorb all the oxygen in the atmosphere, the skull dragon took a deep breath.
As I have a dragon acquaintance, I can easily guess this guy’s next action.
This guy… Plans to breath out flames.

“Guuooooooooooooooooh!”

However, unfortunately, my prediction was off by a half.
Certainly the enemy had entered into a breath attack’s motion, but… What came from inside its mouth were not flames, but a darkish, hazy vapor.
“…?”
Thinking back, the carelessness of the me at the time knew no bounds.
I mean, I… Even after my surroundings were filled with it, I didn’t realize that the vapor was in fact poisonous gas.
Receiving the brunt of the poisonous gas attack, my consciousness soon became dim.

“Chiharu!?”

Suddenly.
Zonmi hugged me as if to protect my body.
“…!”
All of a sudden, my body was struck with the strong pull of gravity.
Somehow, while fleeing from the range of the poisonous gas, it seems that I lost my footing and fell down the cliff.
While it’s a situation that puts my life in jeopardy, I felt miraculously relieved thanks to Zonmi’s strong embrace.

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Where is this place?
When I opened my eyes, there was an unknown ceiling.
“… Chiharu. You have woken up.”
When I recovered my consciousness, I was wrapped in a blanket lying on the floor.

“… Zonmi. Where is this?”
When I tried asking, Zonmi just avoided my gaze,
“… This is inside a cabin for the use of those in distress. That time, after evading the enemy attack, we fell down the cliff and… We went completely off course.”
“… Say what!? We have to return to the course asap!”
“…”
Seeing me jumping out from the blanket, Zonmi slowly shook her head.
“Sorry, but since the battle before around four hours have passed. They should be already starting the preparations for the race’s closing ceremony.”
“… Is that so?”
We couldn’t put up a fight?
It’s a pity, but since it’s become like that, I must change my mind and come up with the next strategy.
What should I do?
What can I do to get my existence acknowledged by the ghoul clan?
While I was pondering several strategies, I noticed an abnormality with my body.
“… Zonmi. Isn’t this room somewhat strangely cold?”
“? Well. It doesn’t seems to me. At least, the inside of the cabin should be some degrees higher that the blizzard out there.”
“…”
Wrong. It’s not that the room is cold.
It’s just that my body is totally chilled.

“… Could it be!?”

I took out the magic stone necklace from inside my shirt.
“Chiharu. This is…?”
“… This can’t be good.”
Could it have broken with the impact of the fall a while ago?
The magic stone I was wearing had a big crack and it has completely lost its former glow.
As this magic stone has the effect of raising the temperature of the wearer, it’s because of that that I could climb this snowy mountain with such light wear.
“… Kuh!”
Wrapping myself again with the blanket, I tried to warm myself.
However, that was pouring water over a hot stone[52].
Inside a cottage that was probably already under the freezing point, a single blanket was but a mere consolation.
“…”

My breath is white.
Trembling altogether, it was my body's danger signal.
"… Chiharu. Is it painful?"
"…"
Zonmi's eyes were tinged with worry.
Honestly, my body is nearing it's limits so I can only mutter weak sounds.
If I remember well, the young lady at the counter told me that the badges given to the participants doubled as transmitters.
That means chances are quite high for rescuers to come once the race has finished.
I must endure until then.
"I'm fine, so… Let me lie down a bit."
What about summoning Kyouko or Iris, with whom I'm already contracted with?
… No, when Kyouko or Iris appears, what are the guarantees for her to be wearing the magic stone? Let's say that when I summon her, she doesn't wear the magic stone… I would have had needlessly increased the damage.
Anyways… Isn't the risk too high?

"Chiharu, for a short while, could you keep your eyes closed?"

When I was pondering in my head several plans to break through this, Zonmi muttered with a glance that looked like she had made a decision.
"… Understood."
As Zonmi told me, I shut my eyes.
Then, for some reason I could hear the smooth rustle of clothes.
"Erm. Zonmi-san…?"
"D-don't look to me!"
"… Roger."
I may be excessively shaken up, but what the heck does Zonmi intend?
Speaking from the results, I could find the answer pretty soon.
Lukewarm.
A feeling a bit colder than human skin was glued to my back.
"…"
Even if I'm numb from the surroundings and being teased, the meaning of this feeling… I easily guessed it.
Zonmi had completely taken off all of the clothes she was wearing… And she had entered stark naked, the blanket I was wrapped in.
"… Zonmi. I would've been fine even if you didn't do that."
"…"
No answer.
Instead, Zonmi's distinct heartbeat and the sound of her breathing were transmitted to me.

I was so nervous that I didn’t know if I was trembling from that or from the cold.

“… I’m very sorry.”

In the end, after a brief silence, Zonmi muttered that into my ear.
“? Why do you apologize?”
“… My body… Isn’t even a bit warm. The ghoul clansmen’s body temperature is 2-3 times lower than that of humans. I… Seeing your suffering, Chiharu… Didn’t know what to do, and… Am I a bother?”
“A bother… That can’t be. Moreover… Don’t worry, Zonmi, you’re veeeery warm.”
“… That’s a lie. That can’t possibly be!”
“It’s not a lie. Certainly, your body may be colder than that of humans. But, Zonmi, doesn’t your heart hold more warmth than anyone’s? That’s why… With just this, my body gets warmed from the core.”
“…”
This is bad.
Was that line too conceited, as expected?
Thinking back calmly, it was a no go…

“Chiharu… You idiot.”

However, contrary to my expectations, Zonmi was fairly happy.
Huumm. Is this what they call “all right in the end”?
I’ll try saying conceited lines from time to time.

“… Hey. Zonmi.”
“Yes. What is it?”
“Can I face you?”
“… Eh? What the heck… What do you mean by that?”
“I can’t settle down addressing someone that remains at my back. Somehow… I want to speak with you looking at your face.”
“… Fine.”
“… Really? Can I?”
“However, you may not pull out the blanket without my consent… I’m not wearing clothes right now, after all.”
“Understood. I promise.”
“…”
Since I pledged, I turned over and faced back.
Zonmi, reaching the peak of her shame, hid half of her face with the blanket.
Zonmi’s slightly flushed cheeks were so lovely that I unconsciously wanted to poke them with my finger.
It’s too late to think about it, but having such a cute girl so close to me was quite… surprising.
“… This is a little embarrassing.”
“… Yeah. It is.”
“…”
“…”

By any chance, I… Maybe I like Zonmi.

I vaguely thought that.
I mean… With that in mind, many things become coherent.
For example, that weird antagonism against Zonmi my sister has… It could be that, guessing the feelings even I am not aware of, she’s holding in her own way a sense of danger.
Buuut… Am I thinking too much?
Actually, these feelings I hold for Zonmi, I still don’t know if they are what’s commonly regarded as love.
We are monster tamer and partner.
The feeling of wanting to be forever at her side, I also hold it for Kyouko and Iris.

“Errm, Zonmi… Can I feel your hair?”

Coming back to my senses, I suddenly blurted those words.

For some reason, I’m absolutely sure that she won’t reject it.
It’s true that Zonmi, compared with the other girls, is the most relentless against accidents of a sexual nature, but… In the end that’s only when they happen by accident.
If I ask her directly face to face, I think that she won’t refuse a thing I do to her.

“… Do as you please, Chiharu.”

As I predicted, Zonmi didn’t refuse.
Zomi, with an expression of having made some kind of resolve, accepted my fingers.
Guuh… It’s not good…
My reasoning can’t endure this.
Zonmi’s hair made a rustling sound and smelled nice… For this reason I don’t believe that I can keep my reasoning…
Kusumi Chiharu.
Second year of high school. Summer.
At last I’ll become a man.
I gulped the saliva collected inside my mouth from the nervousness, at that time.

“You human scum! Whatdoyouthinkyou’redoingtoneechanhey!”

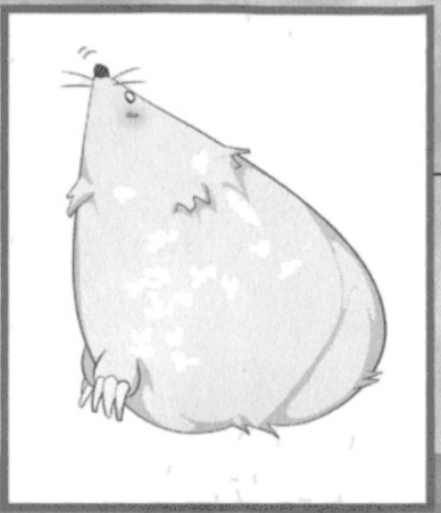
Suddenly, we heard that incoherent angry shout.
What is happening now before us?… Not being able to assimilate it into my head, my body just went stiff.
“… T-to think people came expressly to save you, and before them you, to neechan… You do those rude things! Human, I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you and feed you to Aruru!”
“Hay, Meruru! Act properly!”
“O-ouch! What did’ja do that for, Aruru!”
“You see the situation and don’t understand?
They're doing this out of mutual consent. It’s a nice scene where us, outsiders, cannot find fault with.”
“M-mutual consent!?” You moron! Neechan wouldn’t willingly show her naked body to a man!”
“… Since you don’t understand that, Meruru, how much more will you keep being a little child?
Loving couples showing each other their bare bodies is hardly unnatural.”

“L-loving couples?! Do you mean that neechan and the human are girlfriend and boyfriend!?
Or else… They are showing each other their naked bodies despite not being boyfriend and girlfriend!?
I know about that. Those things are what’s commonly called adultery and bitch… Hmppff.”
“… Meruru. That’s wrong. Maybe you perhaps have stepped onto an outrageous landmine right now?”
Aruru covered Meruru’s mouth, turned to us and quickly bobbed her head.
“Oneesama. Chiharu-sama. I’m deeply sorry.
We heard that your signal had been lost off course and, unable to sit still, we went searching for you, but… It seems that it was a terrible misunderstanding.
We’ll be on standby outside, so… You two, don’t hesitate on keeping at it with what you were doing before… Well, then!”
With an extremely apologetic wry smile, dragging Meruru, Aruru quickly left our side.
“…”
“…”
How could we keep at it in this mood!?

“Chi-Chiharu…?”

The first one to break the awkward silence was Zonmi.
“… Yup.”
“Wasn’t what I said before everything a joke?”
“Understood. We faced mortal danger… And there was no other way to keep ourselves warm. We haven’t done anything we should be ashamed of. Isn’t it?”
“… Yeah. That’s it. Of course… It’s like that…”
“…”
I’m curious about as to why is Zonmi making such a long face, but for the present I was relieved by that confirmation.
That was dangerous.
Somehow… I think I will later regard it as cowardice, but…
If hindrances hadn’t come like that, surely… I think that our relationship would have changed beyond repair.
In order to not hurt Zonmi, of course, but also Kyouko, Iris and Manami—
If I were careless…
My thoughtless actions might disrupt my relationship with them.
It’s too late to say this… Our relationship is made up of a subtle balance.
Renewing my resolution, for the time being I’ll pray for Zonmi to put on clothes.

獣族@ユキモグラ　LV：3



体力:E　**パワー**:E
スピード:C

さむいのが　すきな
もんすたぁ
じんせいの　ほとんどを　ゆき
のなかで　くらす
かわいい　かおして
いがいに　はらぐろ

登録番号 ----

スカルドラゴン　LV：18

体力:A　**パワー**:B
スピード:B

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Chapter 6: The Tamer of the Spirits

“… So this means the victor of the 45th ‘hundredth deaths course’ is the dark horse that came from the human world… The contestant Kusumi Manami. Congratulations.”
“…”
The contest’s results, whatever… Sure enough, Manami won.
Manami, atop the winner’s podium, received an extra-large trophy.
“… Manami-chan. Amazing. You are historically, the first human winner.”
“Yeah. Once again, we’ve been taught a lesson about that girl’s greatness.”
The buzzing at the venue showed no signs of fading.
Since the ghouls not even in their wildest dreams had thought that a human that entered on the spur of the moment would be the victor.
“By the way, Kyouko, what position did you end in?”
“Me? I was 14th.”
“Quite plain, you…”
“L-leave me alone!”
Thinking about it calmly, I believe that Kyouko achieved 14th place of nearly 600 contestants despite being her first time participating was a good performance, but compared with my sister’s active role, it can’t be seen as anything but plain.
Though in the first place, it’s not like we can talk, forfeiting in the middle.
“… At any rate, that dragon that attacked us on the way… What the heck was it?”
“About that… A while ago, I tried asking management, but… It seems they know nothing.”
“… Is that so?”
So that means, as expected, that that dragon… Though it was unrelated to the race, someone put it there to attack us.
Who was it? For what reason?
The instant that I was thinking those things.
From somewhere at the venue a cry was heard.
I looked to the sound’s source, and.

Aren’t those, a bunch of ghouls with no expression suddenly moving towards us like an avalanche?

Those numbers… A low estimate would be a hundred.
Weird. It’s strange.
The bunch of ghouls looked awfully dispirited, how would I put it… Their gait looked wobbly and their skin was pale. And above all, their eyes didn’t show a shred of life.
“!?”
And once again something happened that surprised me.
All of a sudden, the lifeless ghouls started one by one attacking the other ghouls.
Holy cow… Am I dreaming?
The attacked ghouls’ gazes too became empty and devoid of life and assaulted other ghouls.

“The ghouls are turning into zombies!?”

Even I think that that unfolding looked like a joke, but even so, I didn’t find any other words to describe what was happening.
“Ghouls turning into zombies… Could it be!?”
“… Zonmi. Do you know something?”
“Long ago, I read it on some documents.
Monster tamers with the particular ability of manipulating the undead and animated corpses—necromancers.
They bestow transient souls on us undead and on other beings’ corpses and can manipulate them as zombies.
But then… monster tamers with the ability as necromancers are so scarce that, even perusing history books, can be counted with a single hand.
Still… If we take that the necromancer was the one controlling the dragon that attacked us before, this impossible scene can be explained.”
“In other words, someone with the ability of a necromancer is picking a fight and attacking us… You mean.”
“Someone… There’s no need to obscure it like that. Since there’s only one group of people we know that wants to harm us.”
“…”
Exactly as Zonmi has said, I can only think of one person that holds ill will and would attack us.
The group that commits atrocities; employing monsters—the Black Tamers.
This time, once again… Most probably, this is their doing.
And this time, the opponent we must battle… It’s an unknown necromancer able to control the undead at will.

… If that’s the case, this is pretty bad.
What’s bad… The enemy’s ability shows its max potential at the land of the ghouls.
“!? Zonmi Behind you!”
Suddenly, one zombified ghoul jumped at Zonmi.
I quickly rushed to Zonmi’s side and punched that guy.
“Thank you very much… I was a bit scared right now,”
“… It’s still too soon to be relieved.”
“It seems… We’ve been surrounded before we knew it.
The number of zombified ghouls increased explosively and our surroundings were being filled.
I, Zonmi and Kyouko covered each other backs to get rid of any blind spots.
Well… What do I do?
This situation… How do we get over it?
These guys… One by one, the zombies’ strengths were honestly nothing to fear.
If I was alone, I could forcefully break through upfront… Such action is not impossible, but the problem here is with Zonmi.
Guessing from the situation till now, Zonmi, who is from the undead tribe, will be out with the first attack from the zombies.
A zombie Zonmi… In some sense, at least my sister would rejoice with that development.
Fighting upfront may be too much risky.

“… Humph! Ghouls of lowly standing are reckless fellows for opposing my master.”

Suddenly, a huge flame pillar encircled us all around.
The huge flame pillar situated as if to protect us has power to keep the zombies at bay for about ten minutes.
“Iris!? And moreover… Lilith-san and even Manami!? Have you come to help us!?”
“… Chiharu-sama. I beg your pardon. The ones who have launched this attack, I dare say… It would be the Black Tamers.
I don’t know how they did it, but it seems that they have already found our whereabouts.”
“… Fine, monster tamer. What shall I do?
If that’s what thou wantest, I can turn to ashes in an instant every ghoul here…”
“…”
What Iris is saying is true.
Like Zonmi, monsters from the undead tribe are extremely weak to heat.

Even now, we can only talk leisurely like this thanks to the flame pillar that Iris spat out acting as a tough defense wall that's keeping the zombies at bay.
However.
"… No, let's not attack them. They are just being controlled by a necromancer. I don't want to harm unrelated monsters."
"I agree with Haru. If what the enemy seeks is to use the zombies to engage in a battle of attrition… We'll be playing into their hand."
"… There's something that we must put as top priority.
That is… To guarantee Chiharu-sama's safety. Since the Black Tamers know our whereabouts, I suggest we part from Living Lodge at once."
"…"
Surely it may be as Lilith-san says.
Even if the Black Tamers do have a reason to attack us, there's no reason for us to fight the Black Tamers.
If we could avoid fighting without fleeing… That would be the best option.
"Iris… Is it fine with you?"
The problem lies in if Iris will accept…
"… If that's thy wish, I have no reason to refuse. I'll leave my revenge against those guysthe Black Tamers for another date."
"… Is that so? Thanks."
Compared with the previous incident of the attack at the Grandeel archipelago, Iris mental growth is astounding,
Before, just by hearing the name of the Black Tamers, Iris would have got excited and simply charge into the enemy camp, but… Now she respects our opinions and regards her objective as secondary.
I… am very glad for Iris's growth.
"So, let's first do as Lilith-san has said and, for the time being, prioritize leaving this place.
Kyouko and Iris will turn into monsters and carry us. Our destination, right… The port city we arrived at first could do. We'll think about the detail once we've reached there…"

"Please, wait!"

The one who suddenly interrupted my words with a loud shout was Zonmi.
"… I've been worrying about it for a while, but I can't find Aruru and Meruru anywhere. It would be good if they managed to successfully get away, but… I can't leave this city until I've at least confirmed my family's safety."
"Ghoul. I understand your feelings, but… Don't speak selfishly. Have you forgotten our top priority?"
"… I'm very sorry.

Still… Only this I can’t afford to concede. If you have to leave Living Lodge no matter what, leave me behind, please.”
“…”
How careless.
I almost… compelled Zonmi into forsaking her family and fleeing.
Moreover… Thinking better now, Putting my own safety first may be an extremely irresponsible choice.
So, what do I do?
Had we never landed at Living Lodge in the first place… This city’s undead may have been right now living peacefully.
“… Yosh, understood. Before departing Living Lodge, let’s return once to Zonmi’s parent’s home.”
“… Chiharu. Is it fine?”
“Yup. If I had to put it in words, speaking truthfully, I too… am against leaving this place. We haven’t persuaded Zonmi’s father yet… We’ve not wrapped up such an important task and I too am worried about Aruru and Meruru.”
“Buu. Oniichan is too soft with the zombies.”
“… Understood. If those are your instructions, Chiharu-sama, I won’t stop you. However, I earnestly ask you to not exceed yourself.”
“… Roger.”
In any case, the talk is settled.
… At a time like this, it’s reassuring to have monsters that can fly.
We rode onto the transformed Iris & Kyouko’s backs and set off to Zonmi’s parent’s home.

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“All troops! Fight from a distance using your spears! Don’t let the mob step inside the castle!”
When we reached the ghoul clan’s castle, which was Zonmi’s parent’s home, Zonmi’s father… Satosu-san, standing upon the fort, while shouting directions to many brawny soldiers, battled the zombified ghouls.
“Father, you're safe!”
“… Zonmi? More than anything, you're safe too.”
Satosu-san, sighing from relief with a face of deep reassurance,
“… You were Chiharu-kun, aren't you? It’s not like I approve of your contract, but… I’m grateful for bringing back my daughter.”
“Thank you very much… That aside, how’s the situation like at the city!?”
“Aah. The situation is plainly the worst.
… Estimating optimistically, short of 30% of the population has been brainwashed by the person that appears to be a necromancer.”
“… Is that so?”

Weird. It makes no sense.
As the enemy's objective was to manipulate the ghouls to attack us… Was it necessary to brainwash all of the ghouls in the city?
"By the way, Chiharu-kun. Have you seen Aruru and Meruru anywhere?"
"… They haven't returned to the castle? To tell the truth, we are also looking for them."
"… Is that so? It would be nice if those children returned safely, but…"
Satosu-san deeply sighed,
"In any case, it's become troubling. We have to seize that necromancer as soon as possible… The situation has once again turned to the worse."
"By the way, is there any way to return the zombified people to how they were?"
"… There's just one.
The necromancer must employ a cane with a unique magic stone mounted on it. In other words, if we could destroy it…"
"Then we could save the civilians?"
I see.
As Satosu-san said, to fix the chaos of the situation, it seems that we have to search for the necromancer that's the mastermind of the incident.

"A—. A—… Kusumi Chiharu. Kusumi Chiharu. I know that you are there. Do I have to introduce myself? My name is Lance. Lance Patriot. Would saying that I am a necromancer that belongs to the Black Tamers speed up things?"

I looked towards the voice, and.
I could see a boy carrying a megaphone in his left hand instead of on his right one.
"… Darn. As soon as he's mentioned, he appears besides us?"
I didn't expect that he would show himself to us so soon…
I'm grateful, but… Despite things going on successfully, I felt a bad presentiment.
Jumping down from the fortress, I confronted the necromancer face to face.
The boy called Lance was quite younger than me… His age was around the first year of middle school, perhaps?
Noelle, with whom I've battled before, also looked quite young… The Blacks Tamers perhaps are a group with a surprisingly low average age.
"I'm the Kusumi Chiharu you're looking for, but… What do you wish for?"
"… Eeeh. How fast. It seems that your brain works faster than I thought."
"…"
The boy called Lance chuckled.
Why would Lance have brainwashed the ghouls in the city?

At first I thought that it simply was to use them as pieces once it was time to battle, but when I heard Satosu-san's words, I knew.
The necromancer can voluntarily lift the brainwashing on the ghouls.
In other words, that's… Putting it another way, the ghouls of the city are hostages.
There's no reason for the necromancer to not use them as bargaining chips.
"My demand is just for you and me to have a one-on-one peaceful negotiation.
You can just hear me talk while keeping quiet, too. How's it? It's easy."
"… Can I trust your words?"
"I'm not forcing you.
However, if you refuse, as you guess, it can come to the worst conclusion.
Necromancers can freely manipulate the undead… In other words, I have the lives of nearly half of the citizens on my hands.
If you refuse my proposal, those currently under my control… I'll erase at once the souls of the zombies whose numbers are increasing at an explosive rate even now."
"…"
Hey, hey.
He's going to annihilate nearly half of the population?
Surely, I think that that's impossible.
But.
This guy… Does he truly mean what he's said?
This city's… Undead's lives, does he think of them as bugs?
"… Chiharu. Don't be fooled by the enemy's words.
Probably… That's a bluff. Even if he's a necromancer, there's no way he can erase souls."
"Right, right. If you say you can't believe me, I don't mind showing you by killing a zombie."
"…"
Lance laughed fearlessly.
Things have become very bad.
In this situation brought up by Lance, the matter is not if he can erase souls or he can't.
With the option of trying to actually kill a hostage out of the question, we don't have any other way to make sure.
The situation… It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say it's the worst.
"… If I accept your demand, will you free all of the hostages?"
"Of course, I promise you. Since I can't use my full strength while controlling this many zombies. Anyway, when we face each other, I have to do it so I can protect myself."
"… Understood. I accept your demand."
"Chiharu!?"
"Ha, ha, ha. Nice answer. Then, now… Why don't you put on this ring?"
"… This?

“That’s an item called “warp ring”. Using the same principle as summoning, it can transport the wearer to a set place.
Since with two rings, it forms a pair, the moment you equip it we’ll both be warped to the chosen place.
The place I’ve chosen is a snowy mountain a hundred kilometers[53] from here.
Moreover… One more thing. You can be relieved.
Necromancers can control zombies in a radius of ten kilometers[54] at most.
The moment we warp, the brainwashing of the ghouls will be lifted.”
“…”
What peaceful negotiation?
The opponent that has been using thoroughly prepared sly moves until now, at this point… There’s no way that he’ll keep that promise. Probably… No, definitely it won’t unfold as a one on one dialogue.
“… Sorry. Zonmi. Everyone.”
Even so… No matter which traps he’s set after that… I can’t let people die before me when their lives are exposed to risk.
I picked up the warp ring that's left on the snow—and put it on.
So, my consciousness instantly faded and the scenery and sounds around me drowned out.
Aah. Could this be what monsters feel each time they are summoned?

“… Chiharu… Chiharu.”

Inside my dim consciousness, I think I heard Zonmi’s voice at the end.

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When I got back to my senses, I was in the middle of a snow-covered scenery.
I looked around.
What the heck… It was quite an unexpected development.
For me, the worst case would have been getting summoned inside a gas chamber, or else getting trapped with monsters all around, driven into a corner, that kind of thing was what I was expecting.
Before me right now there’s only Lance, and apparently there doesn’t seem to be any traps.
“With this, good… Just now, I’ve put a summon-prevention barrier around the place. With this neither of us can make a summon. This means it will be a proper one-on-one.”
“…”

“You don’t have to be so vigilant.
I can guarantee your life at least until I finish my talk.
To me… I dislike this roundabout behavior, but… Since that was what the boss requested, I can’t bring harm to you.”
“Is that so?”
It certainly seems that what Lance is saying is true.
If Lance truly wanted to kill me, he should have set a trap or two during the warp.
More than anything, from this guy… I can’t feel a shred of any killing intent that says we’ll be putting our lives on the line from now on.
“That boss of yours… Is it Luka?”
“… That’s right. Do I need to explain from the very start?”
Lance nodded slightly with an “of course. So that’s it”,
“Frankly… I don’t give a damn about what happens to other people.
On the contrary, I rejoice on the disgrace of people unrelated to me and, if I say so myself, I’m not one of those who listen to other people’s commands, but… Just her is different. I’m greatly indebted to her. Us Firsts worship her.”
“!?”
Firsts… Now that he mentions it, Noelle, with whom I fought before, also introduced herself as a First.
Thinking back deeply, I think that the black-suited monster tamer I battled first called himself a Second.
Do those words hide a secret of the Black Tamers?
“… Just a question. You Black Tamers fellows… Weren’t you born, different from me, as total humans? Despite that… How come you can transform into monsters?”
“… Ahaha. To tell the truth, I’ve brought you here to tell you about that. I want you to know about us.
And upon learning it all, I want you to cooperate with the organization.
That’s what our boss… Luka-neesan wishes.

Fine. I’ll tell you. Everything about the Black Tamers—“

Lance started his speech like that.
“Are we speaking of around twenty years ago?
The secret society that rules over all of the monster tamers on the human world—the International Monster Association conducted a certain research.
If we go to the bottom of it, we could call that research the roots of the Black Tamers.”
“… A certain research?”
What the heck.

If what he says is correct… Does it mean that the Black Tamers were originally a part from the IMA?
“Creating manmade monster tamers.
Even now, that’s only known to the IMA’s top brass… To them that’s the biggest taboo.”
“!?”
“… Surely only humans can be born with the ability to be monster tamers. So I think they surely conducted the research in order to compensate for the chronic deficiency in the number of monster tamers.
But, you, know?… In her case, they had a problem doing that.
Do you know what’s the basic difference between monster tamers and other humans?
That’s… Putting it simply, they possess from birth, magic power generating cells… It comes to that. If they don’t exist, no matter what special training you put them under, they can’t become monster tamers.
After saying all this, I can answer to your doubt.
The reason why, despite having been born as human, we can use the power of monsters.
That’s because when we were still floating inside the test tubes, we got cells from other monsters inserted inside our bodies.
I… and Noelle, whom you already know, are like that.
The Firsts are the children brought about from that research. It would be the first artificially created monster tamers in history?”
“…”
Certainly… With monster cells that are different from human ones, they can create magic power even if they don’t have a special ability.
Artificially produced… Monster tamers?
What I’m hearing is not a pleasant talk.
Lance and the Firsts may be close to homunculi[55] taken straight out from a fiction world.
Miraculously, I didn’t feel like Lance’s words till now were untrue.
How come?
It doesn’t seem like, at this time, Lance has to lie in such a roundabout way and… If these words are real, then I can understand how, despite having a human body, they can turn into monsters.
“I understand what you say… But, what relation is there between that research to produce artificial monster tamers and the founding of your organization?”
“… Such impatience. With this speech until now, can’t you guess what comes after?”
Lance laughed fearlessly,
“This research faced strong opposition since the project phase.
The special representatives at that time were our boss, Luka-neesan, the youngest to be promoted to high-class monster tamer, and your mother, Kusumi Kanae.

The reason is quite simple.
—The number of children sacrificed was too high.
At the research's initial stage, there were many trial and error stages to check if the embedded monster cells were suited to their body.
Unable to control the monster cells… The number of children swallowed down (consumed by the cells) was too high to count. Can you picture it? Inside a test tube, without time to be born, made to take many drugs before they were even given milk… Brought up in a hellish suffering before they gained awareness, all those friends just conceived… Died one after another with their monster cells on a rampage.
Their corpses, in a disgusting form unidentifiable as either human or monster… Were burned to the bone and discarded so as to conceal the evidence.
Can you understand that suffering?"
"…"
Somehow or other, this thinking may be unfair, but… I feel relieved that my mother was against that research.
And… If Lance's words are the truth, I can understand the abnormal behavior of Noelle, who I went against before.
Her mind is aberrantly unbalanced.
In what kind of environment has one to live in to bring up a girl like her…
That was the doubt I held since long ago.
"Fuu… I'm not used to long speeches. About ten years after the start of this research, it started to produce limited results.
Children like me or Noelle that luckily managed to adapt to the monster cells and lived on started to appear here and there.
Like this, since the time it started giving off definite results, the people that were against the research gradually shifted to the supporting faction, as if flipping over their hands. The one who realized the danger of the situation was our boss… That means Luka-neesan. Luka-neesan, so that us Firsts could live in freedom… Helped us to defect."
"!?"
"This event could be called the biggest blemish on the IMA.
Anyhow, us First that hosted the might of powerful monsters… Since we aimed to escape, all 20 of us at once, there was a big panic.
Due to this incident, between monster tamers and nearby residents… In total, there was over a thousand victims. The IMA frantically attempted to cover it up, but as expected, they couldn't manage an event of such a scale..
Outside rookie tamers like you… Doesn't everyone know about this incident?"
"…"
I didn't know.
The IMA from before had such a blemish…
"Even now, the evil organization that keeps committing crimes… They pinned that label on us, but… The Black Tamers were, originally, an

organization established in order to protect us firsts. So that the strong would protect the weak, naturally, they didn't have the margin to choose their methods.
For that, they put strong monsters under enforce and exterminated the red dragons to obtain dragon blood.
Oh, yeah! I'll add this since I forgot, Clarie-san and the lot are the Seconds. They come from the original research that Luka-san took from the IMA.
But then… That, instead of creating artificial monster tamers… In order to empower people that had the capability to become monster tamers from the start, they are bestowed monster cells.
… Well, with this I've told you everything about me.
Even though things seem this way, could you one-sidedly decide that we are evil and bring down upon us the hammer of justice?"
"…"
My head unable to keep up with the successive revealing of important facts, my thinking froze.
I don't know. Not a thing.
Until now I thought the IMA as good and the Black Tamers as evil.
Though I took everything in terms of good or bad, reality is different.
By hearing this speech… I can't tell who's right or wrong.
The same way that Iris went through hell due to the Black Tamers, the Black Tamers suffered due to the IMA.
"… Do you understand with this?
What you believed justice until now is indeed brittle. It wouldn't be bad if you felt like cooperating with our organization.
The boss seems to have a special interest in you. If you manage it well, couldn't you easily be regarded even higher than us Firsts?"
"…"
While showering me with cajolery, Lance, step by step, approached me.
… If I agree now with Lance's words wouldn't I once again work besides Luka-san?
Good grief… It's laughable.
Luka-san.
You, now… Does it look to you that I would get swayed like this by the words of an enemy?
Does it satisfy you to have anything and everything dancing on your palm as you wish?

"Well. Kusumi Chiharu. Come with us! Why don't you make a new world with us!?"

"…"
Lance, laughing loudly, offered his hand to me.

I see.
If I take this hand, would it mean that from today on I'll be a member of the Black Tamers?
But…

"—My bad, but I can't collaborate with you lot."

"… What!?"
I brushed aside Lance's little palm.
"Certainly after hearing your story I can't properly understand who's in the right.
Frankly, even now I'm confused.
But, y'know, until I came here I had to bear with an uncountable amount of things.
I… To protect Zonmi, to protect Kyouko, to protect Iris, to protect Manami, to protect Lilith-san, so that they can live happily, I must protect the world.
That's why I—and you lot are incompatible."
"…… Ha, ha, ha. Right. Right."
Lance's smile, as if crafted from fine glass, seemed to crack with a jingle.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.
Ahahah

At last with this… I can kill you without fear♪”

“!?”
The instant after Lance’s staff glowed with a strange light.
From inside the ground appeared a huge monster.
A totally zombified dragon.
It was the dragon that I named before as Skull Dragon.
“… Hey, you, Hadn’t you set a summon-prevention barrier!?
It seems that I can’t use summon, but… Is the summon-prevention barrier a cheat item that prevents the opponent from summoning?”

“Kukuku. Kuhahahahaha.”

Suddenly, Lance started laughing hugging his stomach.
“… Something’s the matter?”
“Moron! When have I used summoning?
Do I need to tell you the trick?
As you see, this guy is just a zombie. Moreover… Is a freshly made one.
I buried beforehand the bones of a flying dragon on the ground… And just now I have restored it as a zombie!
Hey, you… Do you understand what this means?”
“Well. If you’re going to tell me, by all means do it.”

“I can use the zombie as much as I waaaaaaaant!
And you, conversely, cannot summon! Lonely lonely boy!
You’ve been driven to a corneeeeeeeeeeeer!”

“…”
What the heck.
I thought it too back with Noelle, but each and every of the Firsts… Do they get a weird mood when fighting?

“Goooooooooo! My little zooooooooooombies!”

Lance raised his cane and, right after, two Skull Dragons came out from the ground.
Along with the one that came out before, there were three Skull Dragons.
Is this the reason why Lance allowed himself to not set traps before?
Due to the summon-prevention barrier set up, I can’t use summoning, and conversely my opponent can use as many zombies as he pleases.
From his way of speaking, even if I manage to defeat these guys… Chances are high that he still has other zombies hidden.
I see.
Certainly, if you think about it normally, this may be being driven into a corner.
“What’s it? So afraid that you can’t speak?”
“…”
From when has been it.
That I lost my sense of normalcy.

From when has been it.
That I've ended in a kind of mental state where I don't feel that it's a significant crisis.
A mighty power sometimes changes people's personalities.
So that this power doesn't engulf me… I must be cautious.
I, with everyone… I'll protect the world where all of them can smile!

Limiter[56]—release.

"Agaaaaaaa… What's with this amount of magic power!?"

The instant after releasing the power of my limiter.
Wrapped up in a dazzling flash all around, echoed Lance's shriek.
Good. Since it's been a long time since I last transformed into a monster, I was worrying if it would go well, but… It's been a total success.
Transformed into a monster, my hair grew until it reached the ground.
This time, in order to conserve strength to fight longer, I didn't grow wings from my back.
It seems that the power of my limiter, when releasing its full power, my appearance changes with the amount released.

"Dieeeeeeee!"

Right after Lance howled.
The Skull Dragons attacked simultaneously from the front, the back and the side.
However, With my limiter released, to me… Something like this didn't count as an attack.
I, lightly parrying the Skull Dragons' attacks, nimbly kicked the ground and entered into an offensive motion.
I don't have time to spare.
That I didn't employ the power of the limiter during the hundred deaths course… Wasn't because I was unwilling in the least to use it.
This power… Its durability is extremely lacking.
Before, when I fought Noelle at the Grandeel archipelago, its limit was five minutes.
This time, since I'm saving a lot of strength, I think I can keep it longer than before, but… It will be, at most, ten minutes?
If, by some chance, we engaged in a war of attrition, I would clearly be at disadvantage.

“Doryaaaaaaaa!”

I launched a dropkick with all my might against a Skull Dragon.
My dropkick, with a power that once managed to floor a five meters tall golem, made the Skull Dragon burst.
A perfect overkill.
Even if it’s a zombie, it seems it won’t move once its skull has been smashed into tiny bits.
The opponent gave me a hard time when I was human, but now that I’m a monster, it’s nothing special.
After that, I defeated the second and third Skull Dragons in the same fashion.
All that in just seconds.
I feel that, compared to before I’ve improved in using my transformed self.
Even if I say so myself, it’s quite a good time[57].

“… At last next it’s your turn.”

While I was battling the Skull Dragons, it seems that Lance had put up quite a distance between us.
I don’t know if that’s where he has buried his next zombie or if he’ll pull out a different trap.
However, I don’t have the time to hesitate.
Either way, it will all go well if I strike faster than my opponent’s next attack.
So as to move faster, I released my Limiter’s power to around 50%.
This time, wings grew.
By manipulating the wings on my back, I close the distances with my enemy to the shortest possible without minding the effect of the mountain’s slope.
With this… It’s checkmate.

“Kukukuku. Kuhahahahaha.”

When I was sure of my victory, the next instant.
I noticed a faint smirk on Lance’s mouth corners.
“!?”
I see… This was what Lance was planning from the start…

What Lance took out to defend himself from my attack were Aruru & Meruru. The two we knew nothing about since before.
They had been already brainwashed by Lance.
Aruru’s and Meruru’s eyes had lost their former gleam and had become empty.
So as to cancel my attack, I released the monster transformation.
“… Guh!”
I, who was already flying at high speed against my enemy, was slammed with a great force against the snow.
“Kuhahahaha! Isn't it cruel, Kusumi Chiharu!
I can’t fight a monster like you upfront.
But, moron! Right from the moment you came here, your defeat was settled!”
“…!”
Lance trampled down on my face while laughing in a good mood.
“… Whaaa? Why are you looking at my with such defiant eyes?
Fine by me. I can send to heaven right now the souls of those ghoul sisters over there.”
“…”
“I know. You can’t, can you?
According to the report I received earlier, you… are an extremely hypocritical guy.
Unfortunately, I couldn’t catch the most important older sister, but these two are enough to shake your heart. Isn’t that right?”
“…”
I see.
Maybe this has become bad.
I was entranced by his ability as a necromancer, but… This youth called Lance is quite the strategist.
In other words, Lance… Had prepared beforehand two kinds of hostages.
The first were the brainwashed civilians to lure me here.
The second ware Aruru and Meruru, who are right here.
I’d say… Instead of brainwashing Aruru and Meruru, he put them to sleep with a drug or something and then he laid them at the top of this snowy mountain.
If he did it like that because of what Lance said about the limits of the range a necromancer can manipulate zombies in… It’s completely irrelevant.
…
……
Darn!
I… am a big fool.
Even if the me until I came here has been put under several traps… I thought that with the power of my limiter I could forcibly make him surrender.
However… Reality is not like that.

Now that he has took hostages in this manner… I… How could I offer the least bit of resistance?
The opponent, foreseen my character, made meticulous arrangements.
Now that it's come to this… I can't do nothing by myself.

"Sonuvabitch! Don't ignore me, you idiot!"

"… Guh!"
I was trampled with all his might.
Lance attacks were strong enough to make my head bleed… But that was all.
The injuries on my head were healed in a flash by the automatic regeneration ability of my Limiter.

"… Humph! They mentioned your healing power in the report from earlier.
If the flesh and blood me takes you on, I may break a bone… There's no way.

You guys, take him on!"

When Lance clicked his fingers… Something surprising happened.
What suddenly appeared from the ground were the ones I should have defeated before with the power of my limiter… The three Skull Dragons.
"Whoa… The heck…"
"Hahaha! That idiotic face… It's a masterpiece!
Didn't I say? The ability of necromancers is controlling corpses.
In other words… As long as I still have magic power, I can revive these guys any hundreds of times!

Gooooooooo! My little zooooooooooombies!"

The Skull Dragons went to trample on my face with their huge paws.
"… Kuh!"
As I nimbly raised my upper body, I managed by a hair's breadth to avoid that and entered once again into a fighting stance.
"Oioioioi. Who said you could evade. Is it all right? Whatever happens to these…"
"…"
Lance directed a horrifyingly lewd glance to Aruru's and Meruru's bodies.

“… Kukukuku. How cute, these children. I’ve decided that they will become my lovers instead of Mary.”
“. Oi. You… What are you sa…?”

“Shut uuuuuuuuup! Don’t bother meeeeeeee!”

Right after Lance yelled that, the Skull Dragon’s gigantic paw drew near me.
“…!”
This time, I could evade with quite the margin.
Certainly… These zombies I’ve named Skull Dragons.
Compared with the monsters I’ve met up till now, their power is in another league and their speed is superb.
However, in the end they're nothing but corpses.
I don’t know if it’s because of that, but it seems that none of these guys holds complex attack patterns.
I kept standing and evading the attacks from the approaching Skull Dragons.
“… Tch. I told you not to evade.
Well, fine. Keep playing with these small fries. Of course… Till you die.”
“…”
I may win.
This time, a path to victory surfaced in my mind.
It’s a thin, thin thread that might break anytime, but… If I carefully pull it in, there’s no way I won’t get a hold of it.
Afterwards… If I just get the time, the place and the timing…!!

“… Kuh!”

Let me properly think of a strategy!
The Skull Dragons, attacking the three at once that have literally bottomless stamina, didn’t give any rest to my body.
However, having grasped that hope, I could move more nimbly than before.
In any case, now it’s the time to endure.
Afterwards… I’ll earnestly wait for my chance.
With decision, dancing boisterously like a tempest I just tried to see into the Skull Dragons’ attacks.

× × ×

How much time has passed?
I felt like it has been an hour already, but I believe it have been just ten minutes.
Afterwards.
Like before, I kept evading the attacks from the three Skull Dragons at once.
Holy cow… Even if I say so myself, I think I've been withstanding it well.
Of course, in this situation I can't achieve a godsend feat like receiving no hits… On the way, I've been stricken by some blows.
There was an inhuman quality.
As at the same time I received the blows, my body turned to regenerating…
It seems that I didn't receive any fatal injuries from there.
Nevertheless… My body is reaching its limits.
Due to moving at full might for a long time… I feel my consciousness growing dimmer and my regenerative power gradually weakening.
Thanks to going through these hard time, My arrangements are on the way to being ready.
After this I have to wait until the last piece falls into place.
Please… Please, be on time.

"… Guha!"

Suddenly, the foreleg of a Skull Dragon kicked my body away.
A disgusting creaking sound came from my ribs.
The broken bones may have injured my innards.
Spitting a large amount of blood from my mouth, I dyed red the snow at my feet.
This… May have become bad.
It would be fine if it was just the injuries.
However, my magic power has already reached its limits and the recovery can't keep up with the extent of the wounds.
In other words… It's a desperate pinch.

"Kuhahaha! You've caused too much trouble! At last your end has come!"

Lance took a sharp knife out of nowhere and came near me step by step.
"Are you suffering? Does it hurt?
Your last hope that was your regenerative power has started to break down and weaken.

However, rejoice.
The true hell starts now.
I'll personally disassemble your body.
By the most wretched means than you can think of, I'll bestow unto you a suffering unimaginable in this world."
"…"
"Kufufufu. I think that those ghoul sisters there will also suffer a shock.
I'll tell you one thing so that you die without regrets.
I, y'know? When brainwashing living undead, I don't snatch away all of their consciousness, just half.
Why do I do that?
Kuhahahahaha! The answer is easy.
Because like that it's really funny!
If they manage to dispel the brainwashing, won't the undead that I brainwashed live the rest of their lives keeping the memories of how I disgraced them?
Picture it.
Your rawhide… Guts… spinal cord, from here on I'll be dismantling them one at a time.
Don't you think that it will be a show of too strong stimulus for tender girls?"
Making an enraptured face, Lance laughed with a coarse voice.
"… Asshole."
"… An? Whaddaya say?"
"…"
Lance.
The reason of your defeat is that you get cocky when you have an overwhelming advantage.
You, who's sure of your victory from the start, or I, who doesn't give up victory till the end.
It seems that the goddess of victory will smile for me.

"… Guh! What the heck!?"

At that time, a gust of wind blew before us.
Come to think of it, Zonmi had mentioned it during the race.
Living Lodge's mountains are known for their sudden gusts of winds beyond common sense.
During that race with my life on the line… Somehow, I became able to ascertain the timing these winds blew at.
I couldn't achieve victory… But participating in the hundred deaths course was very valuable.
Right after Lance's body's was thrown back by the squall.

There was the shadow of a person that moved faster than the blowing wind.
“!?”
Once the wind completely passed.
Lance’s face had just became pale.

“… Is this what you are looking for, necromancer?”

“Idiot… Idiot… Idiotidiotidiot!
I-impossible… It can’t be… What are you doing here! Ghoul princess!?”
“…”
To be frank… The one who suddenly appeared was Zonmi.
Zonmi had taken advantage of the moment when Lance’s stance was broken by the sudden wind and managed to fetch up the cane that’s called the lifeline of a necromancer.
“…”
Zonmi kept silent before Lance’s question, took out the magic power stone inserted in the cane she had in her hand and crushed it.
What now.
The strong foes that had been giving me a hard time until now—the three Skull Dragons, immediately turned to ashes and in the end lost their shapes along with the wind.
“Ne-neechan”
“Oneesama…”
It seems that with the destruction of the magic power stone the brainwashing has been lifted.
The AruMeru sisters instantly recovered the gleam in their eyes and, after making sure they could move at will,

“Uwaaaaan! Scary… I… It was scary…”
“Oneesama… I… Believed that you would come…”

Both of them hugged Zonmi at once.
“Yosh, yosh. It was scary. But since I’ve come, it’s all right. Calm down.”
In order to calm her sisters’ unrest, she tenderly stroked their heads.
Good grief… I grow embarrassed just by looking… It’s an intimate sisterly love.
“… Kusumi Chiharu. What the heck is this!?
Explain it! You… Have to explain this situation to me!”
“It’s not… Like I wasn’t going to explain it to you.
As you know, since you had took hostages, I… Couldn’t attack you.
That’s why I waited.

For my comrades to come rushing to my side.
I believed that if I managed to catch you by surprise, I'll surely could destroy the staff you were carrying.
Afterwards, to raise the chances of success of the strategy, I just synchronized my timing with the wind, but… Do I need to explain anymore?"
"…"
Despite having explained it all, Lance threw me a glance of disbelief that said "it makes no sense".
… That's why. That's why I said it was impossible!
This mountain is 100 kilometers[58] apart from the place we were at the start.
Surely, if you have made contracts with several monsters, you may guess our whereabouts by calculating from the angle the magic power threads make.
However… Even if they had guessed our position, it's still impossible!
They couldn't have arrived to our position in such a short time!
Traversing long distances through the weather of Living Lodge with its rough climate… Don't you understand how dangerous is it!?"
"…"
Certainly, the doubts Lance is holding is natural.
I'm embarrassed that saying this may look like showing off.
To tell the truth, I too… Don't know in what way had Zonmi and the girls arrived here.
Asking for help, I looked at Zonmi, and Zonmi "haah…" with a long sigh, started to tell.
"That's right. Surely, it may have been impossible on my own.
However, have you forgotten?
Our master… No, to us he is a comrade that worries us so much that we get angry…
To reach this place… The two monsters capable of flying… The red dragon and the Nephilim, until each one depleted their magic power, have come flying taking turns in this relentless weather.
After guessing the location using the magic power threads… The quick-witted succubus Lilith calculated in an instant the shortest route to come to this place.
The little sister… Though this time she hasn't especially done anything, We are grateful instead for that.
It seems that I'll have to change my impressions of her.
I… Though I regarded the little sister as being just a troublemaker that rummaged all around guided by instinct, I've realized that she has a kind heart capable of prioritizing others when in a true pinch."
"…"
Is that so?
When I was not looking… Such an exchange happened.

For the successful carrying out of this time's stratagem, several risk came with it… There were worries.
Among them, the one that I feared the most… Was that Lance got fed up with me, who kept evading the attacks to buy time, and took the life of either Aruru or Meruru.
Had that happened… Unable to avoid the attack, the only way left to me would have been unsightly dying.
Nevertheless, I could surmise that the probability of that was extremely low by the lewd glance that Lance had directed to Aruru and Meruru.
Really… I think that in this battle I have been walking on a tight-rope from the beginning to the end.

"… How stupid. Are you telling me that you even took the wind into account?"

With a face of having realized something, Lance dropped his shoulders disheartened.
"I can't understand it. Kusumi Chiharu. You… How come you can unconditionally trust others?"

"That's a given. Zonmi… Those girls are my partners!"

Stating that as a matter of course, Lance's face distorted once again with insanity.
"… Aah. Now I understand why I can't pick up any blood lust from you.
I… Hate brats ignorant of the ways of the world like you.
Despite knowing nothing… You babble lip service. You brandish your own convenient justice.

Someone like you… Doesn't know anything!"

"!?"
"… Chiharu. Be careful."
"… Yeah. Understood."
A myriad of glittering lights seemed to gather around Lance.
… No, wrong. If I express it accurately, the correct way would be saying that he absorbed them.
I'd say this isn't but my own guess.

Like the Skull Dragons I was fighting with until not long ago… Lance has buried many corpses in this snowy mountain as preparations to battle with me.
However, it doesn't seem that no matter how many zombies he calls forth now it would do him any good.
Isn't that why… Lance is absorbing little by little the remaining magic power of the corpses buried all around?
"Don't take me lightly. The match hasn't ended yet!"
Having finished gathering the magic power from the surroundings, Lance showed a grin and,

"Level… Over-limit."

Just spat out those words.
The next instant, Lance's body started swelling and changing to a grotesque shape.
And what appeared before me… Was an skeleton wielding a 2 meters[59] long big scythe.
"Death god Thanatos[60]…
I see. So his power as a necromancer comes from the ability of the death god?"
"…"
Death god Thanatos.
So the monster cells of that guy were implanted into this guy's body before birth?
"Kuhahahahaha! This has turned the tables, hasn't it? Kusumi Chiharu!
Aren't you clearly in a bad shape from the previous battles?
Won't your Limiter reach its limit in just seconds of full use?
The ghoul princess too, coming here must have depleted your magic power.
And conversely, as you see, I'm in tip-top condition.
Well, do we start?
Let's start the decisive ba—"
"… Nope. I think that won't be necessary."
"… What!?"

"The match already… has ended long ago."

As Lance has said, my magic power has already reached bottom.
Even bringing forth the full power of the Limiter, I'll meet the limit in just seconds.
But, that's fine.

That’s fine.
If I could clash with him from the front even for seconds… I feel I won’t lose to him.
“Get ready. Since the me today… I think I won’t be able to go easy.”
So, that said,

Level… Over-limit.

Imitating Lance, I said those words inside my heart.
It was different from when I confronted the Skull Dragons.
My full power right now… Was 100% from 100%[61]!
My hair grew, two bat-like wings sprouted from my back.
I felt like magic power filled me from head to toe.
That amount of magic power was so vast that it melted the snow around me in an instant… If I’m not careful, there’s the danger that it will swallow me.
“… No way. Impossible. Impossible. What kind of monster do you have as a base to get this much power!?”
“…”
To tell the truth, I too am curious about that.
I was told by Lilith-san that it seem that it was one from among the devils, but she hasn’t informed me in the least about the details.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

He may have realized that he has no chance of winning fighting upfront.
As such following that victory goes to the one who hits first, Lance brandished his huge scythe against me.
“… He disappeared!?”
“…”
Wrong.
Speaking properly, I simply circled to your side.
It’s just that our difference in power is so overwhelming that just by moving about normally it makes you think that I’ve disappeared.
Following that, I lightly kicked the ground and leaped, giving a severe blow to the crown of the head of

the huge skeleton Lance had transformed into.

“Gugiiiiiiiiiiiiii.”

Critical hit.
Lance burrowed through the ground made of ice as if it had sunk in.
In the end… After going on for about ten meters[62] his magic power got depleted.
Released of his transformation, Lance just spat blood with his eyes showing the whites.
Like that, since he didn’t even twitch, I think that this should be all there is.
By fighting seriously, it was a too quick and excessively one-sided end of act —.

This marks the end of our long battle.

Epilogue: A step to the beyond

After that.
Around two weeks have passed since the first and probably last incident where the ghouls in town were turned into zombies.
What do I say?… As I've been here at the Netherworld for a long time, I've lost my sense of reality.
We… Who cares!
According to Lilith-san's report… It's been decided that at last we can return to the human world.
It seems that after returning to the human world, the International Monster Association plans on lending us all-out support to protect me from the Black Tamers.
According to Lilith-san.
The person entrusted with guarding me has been deemed the most competent monster tamer in the IMA for two years straight, but… What kind of person is that guy?
I ended up hoping to return even a second earlier to the human world.

Time to set sail.
In order for us to get on board of the high speed yacht that Lilith-san had chartered, we went to the harbor area.
"Oneesama. Chiharu-sama… Please take care."
"Yup. Aruru… Thanks for going out of your way to send us off."
When I conveyed to her my sincere grateful feelings, Aruru exaggeratedly shaking her head,
"… F-far from it!
Chiharu-sama, right now you are regarded as a hero by us ghouls! It's impossible for a princess of this country to not come to send you off!
Really… Really… No matter how much we thank you, Chiharu-sama, it won't be enough…"
"…"
How do I put it, well… It's come to that.
Having freed the continent of Living Lodge from the evil clutches of the necromancer, overnight, I came to be treated as the man of the moment.

It seems that, due to this time's incident, the anti-human faction that was the main one among the ghouls has lost impetus, while the ghouls from the pro-human faction are in rapid increase.
"E-erm… Say… Human. For saving us… Well, thanks."
"Yup. Take care, you too Meruru!"
"Hyau!?"
Even though I planned to pet her head as a parting gift, Meruru swiftly brushed off my hand and hid behind Aruru.
"Ufufu. Meruru is not honest."
"…"
I'd say that, since the incident, Meruru has gone through a sudden change. Specifically, even when we are together, she doesn't bite me in the arm and somehow she seems to have grown distant with me…
"… Chiharu-kun. When I met you for the first time… Sorry for being so unkind.
I know that it's impudent to ask you for this now, but… My daughter… Please take care of her."
"That… Not at all! Please raise your head!?"
No matter what they say, having the king of a country bow to me doesn't sit well with me.
"We were mistaken with you.
Those hateful monster tamers like the Black Tamers… That among humans there were wonderful youths like you… I realized with this incident."
"… Is that so?"
I can't express it before Satosu-san, but…

The ones in the wrong, were they just the Black Tamers?

Ever since the end of the other day's battle, that doubt started crossing my mind.
Things are not that simple.
It was for a short time, but since coming to the Netherworld, it made me come to a realization.
Monsters and humans.
IMA and Black Tamers.
The problems each one shoulders are deeper than I imagined.

The one who can mediate between humans and monsters… Ain't it just me, a chimera of those two…?

Curiously, lately I've been struck by that sense of duty.

Why is it?
According to Lilith-san.
In normal circumstances, it seems that there's absolutely no way that a chimera between human and monster is born.
Could it be that, unexpectedly, there's a reason I've been born into this world…
Whaaat, surely I'm just over thinking things?
"By the way, Chiharu-kun. I need to consult it, but… Can I ask just one thing of you?"
"… Yes. What is it?"
Satosu-san, with stern demeanor, "ahem", cleared his throat,
"To me, so as from now on the friendship between humans and the ghoul clan deepens, it would mean much if you, by all means, joined our household."
"… Y-yeah?"
"Chiharu-kun. What do you say? My daughter?"
"…"
I-I don't understand.
What's this guy spouting all of a sudden?
Besides, the one more flustered than me was Zonmi.
"F-f-f-f-father!? What are you spouting all of a sudden!?
Whatever may be, Chiharu and I… M-marrying… It's still too early!"
"That's the problem!?"
In other words, come the proper timing, Zonmi wouldn't be unwilling to marry me?
"Chiharu… Do you hate it? Marrying… with me."
"I-it's not that I hate it, but…"
Being asked that all of a sudden, I was at a loss for an answer.
"The hero who saved the city… Chiharu-sama marrying princess Zonmi!?"
"That's great! If Chiharu-sama comes to live here forever, we'll be at ease!"
"Hey, everyone! Let's give our blessing to princess Zonmi!"

""""Wedding! Wedding!""""

"…"
This mood, what's with it?
The ones that started singing a "wedding" chant were… The group of nearly ten thousand ghouls that had come to see us off.
As if displeased by the choir that blessed our wedding, Iris, beside me, stuffed her cheeks.
"Monster tamer. Could it be that thou… Hast thou forgotten your pledge with me?"
"… Eh?"

“I was the one thou exchanged a pledge of betrothal before! Dostn’t tell me thou hast forgotten!”
“…”
Aah. Since she has stopped being all sticky with me since Manami gave her sex ed, I had forgotten until just now, but… That promise is still alive inside Iris.
… Now that I think of it, I haven’t seen Manami for a while.
At such an important time… Good grief, where would she be loitering around.
“S-sly! If it comes to that, I too announce my candidacy!”
“…”
For some reason, after stating that, Kyouko grabbed my arm.
“… Wait a minute. If you have proposed to marry me, could it be… Kyouko, do you love me?”
As I asked that, Kyouko’s cheeks became really flushed,
“D-don’t misunderstand! If everyone except me proposed marriage to you, it would be unbalanced!”
“…”
She developed a cryptic logic.
Is it all right for you to propose in marriage due to such a pitiful reason?
“□□□[63]! Stop joking, you two!”
“Manami!? Where have you been till now!?”
“The one who will marry oniichan can only be me, his true blood-related sister! Oniichan! Accept Manami’s love! Tou!”
Suddenly, Manami took off the white cloth that covered the mysterious object that had been there for a while before us.
“Uwah… For reals?…”
What now?
What came from inside it was a monument statue modeled after us siblings.
Moreover, if we talk about its design, as Manami was in a pose of straddling me, it was the worst thing that, upon further look made you involuntarily say “does this really fit here?”
“… I see. Now that you mention it, I’ve heard of it.
The thousand deaths course winner’s privilege is having a monument statue of yourself erected in the city.”
“Lilith-san… Now’s not the time to calmly explain about things.”
I-it’s the worst conclusion…
All of the present people were taken aback.
Besides, as if it was nothing unusual, she made the crowd of ten thousand ghouls that were excitedly chanting wedding cheers until a while before become silent in a flash… In some sense, it’s amazing. This sister of mine.
And.
To tell the truth, I’m actually grateful for my sister’s actions.
Why is it?

If the spiral of wild enthusiasm of the flock had continued a little while more, even I… Would have suffered some sort of reaction.
Somehow… It’s not like I hadn’t been urged by a conclusive determination, but thanks to my sister’s eccentric antics, I could leave it unsettled like that.
“E… Wha…?”
Thinking it better, I think that something like this has occurred not only once or twice.
In the end, with the weird mood created by my sister not having been dispelled, we rode on the boat and set sail.

“Fuah… With all this, I’m beat. I’ll go ahead to the cabin to rest.”

It’s not like I really was so tired, but, yawning a bit exaggeratedly, I left the deck.
“Chiharu. Wait, please!”
“My bad. Zonmi. Since today I’m so tired, let’s leave it for…”
“… Wait, please.”
I was tugged with force from the sleeve.
When I turned my head… There was Zonmi with a serious gaze.

“I still haven’t heard the answer from before. Chiharu, do you dislike the idea of marrying me?”

“…”
Right after Zonmi inquired me.
I noticed the surrounding girls directing their glances at me.
…
……
What to do. Don’t I say something?
However, how should I answer?
Should I sincerely say that I don’t know?
… No, somehow or other, I think that if I give Zonmi an ambiguous answer, the girls here won’t give their consent.
Troubled, in the end, what left my mouth, as if leaving the decision to others… Were the worst words, not fitting of a man.
"--T-that’s right, what about you? What do you think?”
“… About what?”
“About… What Satosu-san said earlier. Could it be, don’t tell me you really want to marry me?”
“…”
“Just kidding. There’s no way. Ahahahaha.”

Right after I averted my gaze, like seeking for help.
Like that time with Iris before—

Zonmi’s tender lips plugged up my mouth.

“!?”
“… Chiharu. Listen to me seriously.”
“…”
“These are my feelings. Since where do I harbor these feelings… Honestly…
Not even I know.
However, These… Feelings of mine are the real thing.

… Chiharu. I like you. I love you as a man.”

“…”
From nearby there came a sound of something hitting the ground with force.
Looking at the noise’s source, there was a teary red-eyed Manami dashing out at full throttle before me.
“Manami-chan!?”
Not even sparing a glance to Kyouko, who called to her, Manami left the place.
To Manami, this situation… Was without doubt a shock.
At this time, there’s no need to think about it.. The one who keeps the balance of our relationship… Was none other than Manami.
However, the die have been cast.
They’ve been unknowingly cast.
Our time, just now, has made a big turnaround.
Contrasting with the feelings hidden inside our hearts, the boat we were riding peacefully headed to the human world.

Afterword

This is Kankitsu Yusura.
Maohime's fourth volume, have you enjoyed it?
It may be sudden, but I think I'll write this afterword under the theme "self-deprecating jokes".
I think that there are many points to abject, but it's not a joke to write an afterword for the fourth time and run out of themes.
No, about afterwords, can't the author write about harmless and inoffensive that happen around him?, I think that many readers will ask that, but… I don't think so.
The joke can bomb.
And if the joke bombs… As the afterword is a part of a fine book, the readers will brace themselves before they are made to enjoy it to the fullest! [64]
Well, well.
To tell the truth, my intention there was that, when going drinking these days with my fellow authors, I'll get complimented lots about my afterword.
"Kankitsu-san! I've read it! Maohime! The best was the afterword."
"Kankitsu-san's afterwords are on the level of a pro. Go! Afterwords pro!"
And so on, on that line (lol).
Once I'm said that… Next thing, I'll be run over by the urge to shout. "You guys… Talk a bit about the volume proper."
…
……
Eeeh. That thing from before hasn't happened, the senior writers toying with me are only my wild delusions.
The facts? I have not made even one fellow author, I have never been invited to an author's drinking party! To begin with, if they had that community spirit, they could have lived on without becoming authors.
Uhohoi. Uhohoi. [65]
This me even now is living happily.
Yes. Looking back in time is frightening[66]… To end the self-deprecating jokes about my dark past, I think it's time we start with the announcements.
Whatever! The runner-up of HJ Bunko's 6th Rookie Awards, 'Ore to Kanojo no Rabukome ga Zenryoku de Kurorekishi', has gone on sale at the same time as this book.
The genre is youth love comedy.

To be frank, this work… Since, as the author. I'm confident on the response to it, for those readers who are interested, by all means give it a reading!
And furthermore, this same mont, on June 27th, the comicalized version of 'Maou na Ore to Ghoul no Yubiwa' gets its first volume published.
Since it's a comicalization that made me shout "Isn't this better than the original?", I think many, not minding if they have or they haven't read the original work, will enjoy it.
It's overall erokawaii[67] and funny!
I feel that it's way better than the original work.
Personally, I'm interested in Yaya Hinata-sensei's… Original 4-panel manga spin-off centered on the enemy character Clarie.
So… I hope we can meet again.

Kankitsu Yusura

References

1. ↑ Almost 1 foot.
2. ↑ The same way people take off their shoes when entering a single-family house or a school, at some hotels, shoes are taken off when entering a room.
3. ↑ Person who gets sexual arousal from undeveloped or underdeveloped girls. From *lolita* (title character from Nabokov's novel turned into movie) + complex.
4. ↑ The distinct impression of having seen something before, having felt something before of having been somewhere before, despite knowing that's not possible. Sometimes is used with the sense that things follow the usual pattern, like here, but that's not it's accepted meaning.
5. ↑ Thin Japanese kimono often used as hotel's clothes, a bathrobe or, if decorated enough and with the correct accessories, as summer festive wear.
6. ↑ It means just "Japanese poem" and can be any of the 5-7 syllables based traditional Japanese kinds of poems, though it usually refers to the tanka (5-7-5-7-7).
7. ↑ 794-1185 AD. A period full of influences from China when arts flourished that preceded the samurai era.
8. ↑ Philia, tastes.
9. ↑ Staple otaku word to describe the feeling of adorable little girls, or so they say. Its usage is braoder than that. As I see it, since "moe" comes from "moeru" (to burn), it may be related with "burning feelings", "burning with passion" or "alighting the heart".
10. ↑ i.e. it was outside his capabilities to prevent it; a legal term.
11. ↑ With a nuance of going to ask for her hand.
12. ↑ Once again, the same nuance.
13. ↑ Means bored of the island scenery, indifferent because of familiarity.
14. ↑ Said in English.
15. ↑ Many kinds of TVs, when you enter a wrong channel code when setting them up, play the same beep used to mask censored words.

16. ↑ C’mon. It’s not like Russia only have snow. Not like non-Russians care. Save for the vodka. Eh Canada has snow too fucking Cdn winters...
17. ↑ Feelings of adoration (or moe) that stem from a deep contrast between the usual and the unusual, the expected and the fact.
18. ↑ Title given to daughters of rich or noble families (or both).
19. ↑ Just above 4' 11".
20. ↑ Mortal enemies. Mongooses kill snakes (and sometimes eat them), while vipers (snakes in general) viciously attack them in legitimate self-defense (well, sometimes preemptive self-defense).
21. ↑ He says “hitomawari toshiue”, which means “older than someone by a turn of the Chinese Zodiac” (12 to 23 years).
22. ↑ She says “hitomawari nenrei no ue”, which means the same as above, but more polite. I guess that, in this case, she´s fixing the Rat as the start instead of the year of birth.
23. ↑ A reference to voice actress Inoue Kikuko (Belldandy from *Ah! My Goddess*, Tendou Kasumi from *Ranma ½*, Lust from *FMA: Brotherhood*, among others), known for their trademark “Inoue Kikuko, 17 years xx months old” (she was born in 1988), that has spanned a cult among fans (as well as an internet meme). Hard to believe that she still boast the same popularity even after marrying and bearing a child, both thing known as the graves for VA careers.
24. ↑ If we take 80 years as the Japanese life expectancy, that’s less than the minimum given by Lilith before (240 years)
25. ↑ A poisonous plant with “human-like” roots (just think of something like a white carrot, but four of them from a single stalk), which is believed of having magical properties and that supposedly screams when uprooted, killing anyone who hears it.
26. ↑ The art of the subtle eroticism consistent of showing glimpses of the underwear under the skirt, fueling the imagination, opposed to showing them in plain view (known as *panmoro*), both of them opposed to revealing outfits, the three of them opposed to full nudity, the four of them opposed to barely covered nudity.
27. ↑ From **Aru**ru and **Meru**ru; this guy loves to create combos.
28. ↑ And now the title makes more sense.
29. ↑ I leave it like this because of AruMeru’s names. If someone has a better alternative, don’t be bashful.
30. ↑ Around 30 feet.
31. ↑ You are bound to have seen this in anime, when someone gets out of their lights (by a hit, a shock or too much horniness, for example), a *chin!* sound effect is heard and their soul goes out of their mouths. Meaning: done for.
32. ↑ Yes. RIGHT arm. Even though the picture shows a left arm. It’s right.

33. ↑ Meaning Chiharu and Manami.
34. ↑ Foxes, raccoon dogs and badgers (the last two often mistaken with each other) are pictured as shape-shifting tricksters on Japanese culture.
35. ↑ Around 497 miles.
36. ↑ A barrier, often spiritual.
37. ↑ You know, like Nono.
38. ↑ Loose term to refer to natural hot springs, health resorts and spas.
39. ↑ Celsius. That's about 104 °F. Japanese people like very hot baths. Old Japanese people, especially from certain areas, like even hotter baths.
40. ↑ PolyEThylene, the most common plastic bottles are made with after PVC was discouraged for that use.
41. ↑ As in "cookie monster".
42. ↑ Well, he explains it on the next sentence, but it's an euphemism for what most Japanese males who never got a woman (i.e. a large part of Japanese males), and some who did, think it happens when two or more girls are together inside a room with no man on sight, especially when little to no clothes are somewhat involved.
43. ↑ Name given to the Japanese animation, usually male oriented, broadcasted on TV in the late hours of night, from 23:30 to 30:00 (it should be 6:00, but Japanese people seem to think that if you keep adding, it's still the same day). Usually they have spicy situations (from full nudity to pantyshots; I really wonder why TWGOK fall into this category. BTW as a bonus, both this exclamation mark and the previous one were originally a "ya", which is the equivalent of an exclamation mark in Japanese poetry.
44. ↑ i.e. Chiharu and Manami.
45. ↑ She says "ningen-sama", which is "humans" plus a honorific suffix meaning superiority. Applying it to oneself sounds conceited.
46. ↑ Just under 16 feet and a half.
47. ↑ This is a pun; "attack group" and "leading group" sound the same.
48. ↑ The original says "at a speed of a fly alighting", a reference to a kind of throw from the baseball manga Dokaben that was commonly referred as "fly alighting" while it's proper name was "super slow ball". Or one was the reading while the second were the kanji.
49. ↑ Much like the Z Warriors from Dragon Ball with the **ki**.
50. ↑ Geez... Reading Kankitsu-sensei may make you think that his character's bodies are made from protein supplements.
51. ↑ As in "game, set, match".
52. ↑ Futile, not enough (a Japanese saying).

53. ↑ Around 62.14 miles.
54. ↑ Obviously, 6.21 miles.
55. ↑ Artificial humans made inside a flask; alchemy term.
56. ↑ Written as “monster transformation”.
57. ↑ As in “doing something in the shortest time”.
58. ↑ 62.14 miles.
59. ↑ ~6 feet.
60. ↑ Name of the Greek god responsible of death in sleep (Apollon was responsible for sunstrokes and pestilence, Arthemisia for strokes and sudden death and Hades for death in general).
61. ↑ Since 100% is “a hundred out of a hundred”, I don’t know why the Japanese say this, which means “100 out of 100 out of 100 out of 100”, but they do.
62. ↑ Around 32’ 10”.
63. ↑ HAHAHA; in English in the original.
64. ↑ Not an easy translatable joke. To “bomb” a joke is said by Japanese as to “slip” a joke; “fine” is written as “standing up faction” (or “those who stand up”), and he links the “before” (mae) of “before enjoying” with “maenomeri STANCE” (stance as if to fall)… meaning that they’ve slipped and were about to fall.
65. ↑ Goofy(copyright by Walt Disney Co.)’s laughter.
66. ↑ Or surprising, whichever may be.
67. ↑ Erotic & cute.

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